THE SEVEN STABS

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THE SEVEN STABS

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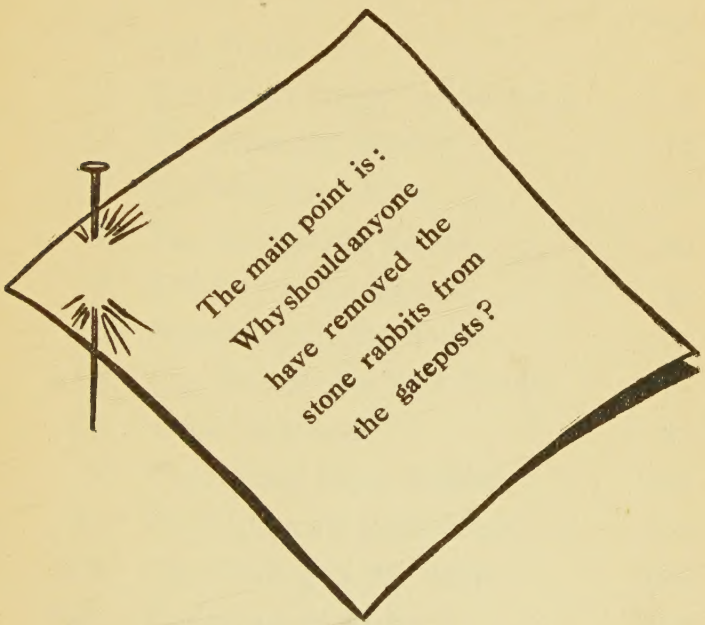
BY

JOHN CAMERON



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THE SEVEN STABS

CHAPTER I

THE PROLOGUE

THERE are a few business men, a handful of atlas-makers, a traveller or two, and perhaps a dozen geographical fanatics who can place accurately and name correctly the little cluster of republics which have been chipped off the vast block of what was once the Russian Empire, and which nestle, side by side, along the shores of the Baltic Sea. Who, for instance, has heard of Baltania, a small, independent republic among that cluster? And yet it exists and it devotes a considerable portion of its patriotic energies to the task of telling the world that it exists, and that if it ceased to exist the world would be a poorer, a duller, and a drabber place. It is an immutable law of political mathematics that a country's publicity and propaganda service varies in inverse proportion to its geographical extent and industrial importance. In other words, the fewer people there are to blow the national trumpet, the louder they blow it.

Baltania realized the truth of this law from the very beginning of its existence as a chip of the old Russian block, and its first three acts as a separate, free, and peace-loving state were the same as the first three acts of all the free and peace-loving states that were created by the aftermath of the war. It established conscription, it appointed a censor of the press, and it founded an Anglo-Baltanian Society in London.

The Chairman of the Anglo-Baltanian Society was Sir Arthur Waldingham, a man famous for the extent of his riches, the amiability of his character, and the beauty of his daughter. Sir Arthur had inherited a large fortune from his father, who had lived and traded for many years in the Russian province which was now Baltania. Sir Arthur himself had been born there, and in early life had worked in his father's office before retiring from business. He was an ideal chairman of the society. He was rich; he owned a large house in Belgravia and a large house on the Thames near Pangbourne; he entertained lavishly anyone whose connection with the new republic seemed to qualify him for hospitality, and Celia Waldingham was one of the most beautiful girls who ever dazzled the eyes of a Baltanian guest at a dinner party.

For ten years the society flourished and grew strong under the sun of Sir Arthur's wealth and the refreshing showers of Sir Arthur's champagne, until that disastrous summer night at Pangbourne when perhaps the most illustrious, certainly the most celebrated and romantic, of all the sons of Baltania was murdered in the house of the chairman of the Anglo-Baltanian Society. The society never recovered from the blow. It languished and declined, until it was finally dissolved and its functions were taken over by the newly formed Society of Friends of Baltania in London.

CHAPTER II

THE USUAL DAGGER IN THE BACK

THE body was found at a quarter to seven on the morning of Monday, June the 22nd, by Ethel May, under-housemaid in the Waldingham establishment at Westbrook House. Ethel May had got up, as was her usual custom, at half-past six, had put a kettle on the gas stove in the kitchen to boil while she dressed, and a quarter of an hour later started to carry a tray of cups of tea from the ground floor, in a dark corner of which her tiny bedroom was unobtrusively secreted, to the attics, where slept the real masters of the household, the cook and the parlourmaid. The precious cargo had almost finished the first lap of its journey when Ethel May's eyes arrived at a level at which they commanded a view of the long corridor which ran the full length of the first floor of the house. Ethel May was, in fact, standing on the fifth stair from the top when she saw the body lying on the landing in front of her. She did not hesitate for an instant. She dropped the tray in one

magnificent crash upon the stairs, and burst into an ear-splitting and continuous tempest of screams. Ethel May was skimpy in size and frail in appearance. but her lungs and vocal chords were evidently built on the grand scale, and were in first-class working order. But, in spite of her coruscating and sustained top notes, the household assembled slowly. The quiet routine of an English country house runs on smooth, well-ordered lines, gradually evolved by centuries of experience, and it takes a good deal to disturb it. Gradually, however, Ethel May succeeded in disturbing it, and figure after figure, dressing-gowned and sleepy, emerged from the attics and peered nervously over the banisters. At first there were no signs of movement in the bedrooms on the first and second floors, but at last young Leslie Brookes poked a tousled head out of his room on the second floor, and called out in a tone of sleepy expostulation, "I say, what's up?" He slowly emerged, and peered sleepily over the banister. Then he saw the body, and his face fell and his eyes opened. After a moment's hesitation, he walked briskly downstairs towards the under-housemaid, who, apparently unconscious of his approach, continued to make the windows rattle and the welkin ring.

"Here, stop that!" said Brookes abruptly and loudly, and, rather to his surprise, Ethel May stopped as suddenly as she had begun and stared at him. Then she turned, scuttled downstairs, and vanished into the fastnesses of the kitchen. The next moment Sir Arthur Waldingham's head appeared at his bed-room door, and he too enquired vaguely, "What's up?" adding, "Hullo, Leslie, what's the matter?"

Leslie Brookes pointed at the body on the floor, and Sir Arthur stared at it blankly without moving.

"What is it?" he said at last. "Someone hurt?"

"It's Harden. He's dead."

It seemed to take an appreciable number of seconds for this to penetrate Sir Arthur's mind, and when he did reply he merely said: "Harden? What's the matter with him?" Then he came out of his room and walked towards Brookes. When he saw the body he started violently, leant against the wall, and muttered "Good God!" and a moment afterwards: "How ghastly!"

He was right. It was ghastly. The dead man was lying on his face, close against a bed-room door. He was wearing a gorgeous silk dressing gown over his pajamas, and in the middle of his broad back there protruded the hilt of a knife.

A pool of blood made a dark blot upon the light-coloured parquet floor, and a trickle had taken advantage of a slight irregularity in the parquet to meander away in a tiny rivulet down the corridor.

"Is he dead?" asked Sir Arthur in a low voice.

"Dead as a doornail," muttered Brookes.

"Better feel his pulse and make sure."

With a slight shiver the young man stepped carefully across the dark pool and fumbled awkwardly for the man's wrist.

"Quite dead," he said a moment later, stepping back.

"Good God!" repeated Sir Arthur, looking round as if he were surrounded by people who might help and advise him on this appalling and calamitous situation. He almost looked startled to find that there was no one there, and he fell back on his invariable formula when confronted with a difficulty.

"Where is Celia?" he asked vaguely.

The question startled Brookes, and he answered:

"Yes, by George, and where's everybody else?" He looked up, and saw the line of faces hanging in a mixture of terror and delicious excitement over the attic banisters.

"That girl woke the attics. Why didn't she wake Celia and Lavender and Harden's secretary-fellow? And where's Marston? Oh, here is Marston."

Another bedroom door opened, and a small square man in a plain brown dressing gown came out and examined the scene through gold-rimmed pince-nez. Sir Arthur turned to him as a frightened old lady in a London thoroughfare turns to a policeman.

"Marston—I say, Marston. Look at this. Terrible, ghastly, appalling! Really, I don't know what to do. Terrible!"

The small stout man advanced, and gazed at the body impassively.

"Dead?" he inquired, shooting a glance at Brookes.

"Yes."

There was a slight pause, and then Brookes blurted out:

"I say, this will make rather a difference to you, won't it?"

"Yes, by Jove!" chimed in the baronet.

Marston looked steadily at the body, and replied in even tones:

"I lose the chance of making a couple of millions."

"Too bad," muttered Waldingham vaguely. "Altogether too bad."

"You have sent for the police?" asked Marston.

"Not yet," said Brookes, and their host came suddenly out of his perplexities.

"The police, of course!" he exclaimed. "Send for the police and don't allow anything to be touched. Everyone must use the back stairs. Nothing must be touched. That's most important. All the books say so." He glanced from Brookes to Marston with a kind of amiable triumph at his own wisdom and sagacity.

"All right," said Brookes. "If you like, I'll mount guard and see that nothing is touched."

"Good, good," said Waldingham. "I will telephone at once for the police." He hurried along the corridor, and disappeared down the back stairs. In a few moments the two men on the first floor could hear his voice excitedly ringing up the police station. Brookes remained on guard, and for several minutes Marston remained with him, lost in profound thought and staring at his bedroom slippers. At last he observed quietly:

"A definite score for Frankfort," and went back to his room.

In about a quarter of an hour the local police inspector arrived, and, being a sensible man, almost his first action was to telephone to Scotland Yard for assistance. He had no great confidence in his own abilities, and still less relish for making himself a nuisance in the house of one of the local gentry. He felt strongly that if people were to be examined and cross-questioned, and possibly even arrested, it was far better that a strange official from London should bear the brunt of it all. Inspector Williams therefore confined his energies to making a list of the people who were in the house on the night of the murder, drawing a plan of the rooms, passages, and staircases, and posting a cordon of policemen round the grounds to see that no one attempted to get away.

While he was engaged on his plan-drawing, the first of four diversions occurred. Sir Arthur created the first. He was in a pitiable state of agitation and distress, and was unable to keep still for a single moment, rambling aimlessly about the ground floor, colliding with breakfast-laden maids, and muttering, "Where is Celia?" until his rambles took him into the gunroom, where he found that the window had been forced and was wide open. Inspector Williams at

once locked the gun-room door and pocketed the key.

The second diversion was the arrival across the sunny lawn of Celia Waldingham, carrying a wet bathing dress and a damp towel on her shoulder. She looked so radiant and springlike, with her glowing cheeks and dark hair blowing in the faint breeze, that Leslie Brookes, who had been relieved at his post by a policeman and was watching her from the dining-room window, felt a sudden gust of fury against life, "or whatever you like to call it," at bringing such a wisp of loveliness into close contact with a gruesome and bloody murder. As he watched, he heard a window thrown up and the voice of Inspector Williams calling out, "Come in by the side door, please, miss." And Celia's clear voice answering:

"Hullo, Inspector. What have I done this time?"

Eager to know what the inspector wanted, she completed the rest of her journey at a run, and a moment later Brookes heard her voice in an exclamation of horror and stupefaction. Immediately afterwards a two-seater Bentley with a rakish body pulled up at the front door of the house, and Miss Lavender Arlington, heroine of a hundred musical comedies, sprang out, ran up

the steps, and plunged into the tragedy. The fourth diversion was the arrival of the London correspondent of the *Kurjer Baltaszy*, the most important newspaper in Baltania, with a request for information. The policeman who refused him admission at the gate was naturally suspicious of all foreigners, and was only with difficulty persuaded to send in the journalist's card to the inspector. The latter was considerably startled by the request, and at once went down the short avenue to see the man for himself. The correspondent was a short, stout man, with steel-rimmed glasses, blue eyes, and the general air and appearance of a German university professor. He bowed politely to Williams, and was about to speak when the inspector cut him short with the words: "You want information. What about?"

"About the murder of Herr Harden."

"It is exactly one hour and five minutes since the murder was discovered," snapped Williams. "How did you find out about it?"

The correspondent spread out two pink, podgy hands.

"There is no mystery," he said. "My newspaper wanted an interview with Herr Harden. He is—or was, rather—a man in whom much

interest was taken in my country, especially just now. I came down last night, put up at the Blue Dragon, and this morning a servant maid came racing into the hotel shouting that Herr Harden —she said Mr. Hardinge, but I presumed it was the same—had been murdered. I put on my boots, and here I am."

"Damn that girl!" said Williams with emphasis, and then, after a moment's thought, he added: "It's true. Harden has been murdered. But I can't say more than that. Detectives are on their way from London, and I've no doubt they'll issue a statement to the press later in the day. There may even be an opportunity for reporters to meet one of the Yard men, and in that case I've no doubt your credentials, if you have them"—the correspondent smiled benignly—"if you have them with you, that is to say, will gain you admittance."

"You wouldn't let me see the place where the murder was committed?"

"Certainly not."

"*Ach!* Very well. I understand. A rule is a rule. I was educated in Germany, where they understand rules. Good-morning."

The London correspondent of the *Kurjer Baltaszy* retired with dignity, and Williams went

back to the house, muttering "Damn that girl!" repeatedly to himself.

Half an hour later a fast car drove up, and out of it jumped Inspector Fleming of Scotland Yard, and Sergeant Maitland, his assistant.

CHAPTER III

THE FINANCIAL MOTIVE

Inspector Fleming got to work at once. He began by assembling the entire household in the hall and asking Sir Arthur to retire, with his relatives and guests, into the billiard room, while the housekeeper was to march her staff into the kitchen. No one was to leave either room until permission was given. Having thus disposed of possible interrupters, Fleming listened to the local inspector's brief account of the events of the morning and then took his coat off and began his investigation. At the top of the stairs he paused to examine the body and the position in which it was lying, and it was not until Sergeant Maitland had taken a number of photographs of the scene from different angles, that he came to close quarters with his problem.

The body was that of a big, broad-shouldered man of about thirty-five or forty years of age. It was lying face downward, parallel to a bedroom door, and so close to it that the whole of

the left side was touching it. The left arm was twisted back, so that it rested on the top of the left side of the body, and the right arm was flung straight out along the floor, the whole attitude suggesting a swimmer who has just completed a long side stroke. The hilt which protruded from his back was made of plain metal.

"Test for fingerprints, Maitland," said Fleming, after he had finished his scrutiny, and then he turned his attention to the corridor. The first thing that caught his eye was the blurred and irregular outline of one side of the otherwise clearly defined pool of blood. There was not the slightest doubt that someone had stepped in it. A yard away there was a fainter splash of blood on the parquet, and Fleming's spirits began to rise. "That's where he put his foot after he stepped in it," he murmured. "Now, where did he go after that?" But there were no more traces of the blood-stained foot or feet in the corridor. "Took his boots off. Cool bird," commented the detective. "Stood over the body in the middle of the night and took his boots off." He straightened himself, and turned his magnifying glass on to the balustrade which looked down on the hall below. There was a faint mark on the woodwork.

"Test here for fingerprints, Maitland. He touched the blood on his boot with his hand, and then steadied himself on the balustrade while he was taking them off."

Fleming proceeded with his examination of the corridor slowly and methodically, but said nothing more to his subordinate until he was almost at the far end, where the passage terminated in the back stairs. He halted there, and gazed at the floor for a full two minutes. He lay down on his face and peered intently through his glass. He got up and ran his fingers backward and forward through his hair, and finally he called to the sergeant.

"Maitland."

"Sir!"

"Come and tell me if I'm seeing things."

The sergeant advanced, and Fleming pointed to the floor.

"What are those?"

The sergeant looked long and earnestly, and at last said cautiously:

"They look to me like two drops of blood, sir."

"That's what they look to me," said Fleming. "But it's extremely odd."

"Why, sir?"

"Sixty-one feet from the body and, perfectly

round, symmetrical drops. How did they get here?"

"Off the boots," ventured the sergeant.

"Off the boots," Fleming considered. "It's just faintly possible. But it's extraordinarily unlikely. They're the only drops in the corridor. If they were off the boots, you'd expect them to be nearer the body. The drips would begin over there, and get fainter the farther they were carried."

"Mightn't it depend on the way they were carried, sir?"

"It might. But if they were carried in such a way that they dripped here for the first and only time, it follows that they must have done the rest of their dripping on the murderer's clothes or on to a handkerchief or something. It's possible."

Fleming relapsed into silence, and the sergeant returned to his search for fingerprints.

At the end of another hour Fleming had convinced himself that there was nothing more to be learned in the corridor or on the stairs, and, descending to the library, he asked for an interview with Sir Arthur Waldingham.

Sir Arthur, looking a little less distracted, came at once.

"I want your help, Sir Arthur," began the

detective, and the baronet interrupted him with a nervous volley of offers to do anything in his power to help.

"It's such a relief," he concluded, "such an enormous relief that Scotland Yard has come to take charge."

"Quite so," said Fleming. "Now, who was this Harden?"

Sir Arthur was startled, and at once apologized.

"I beg your pardon. It was rude of me to look surprised. To those of us who are interested in Baltania the name of Harden is such a household word that it is difficult to realize that he is not as famous to everyone as he is to us."

"Quite so," said Fleming, "and who was he?"

"Harden? Who was Harden? Let me see how I can best describe him. He was the leader of the pre-war agitation for a free Baltania. With his own hand he assassinated more than fifty Russian police spies. After the war he led the Baltanian Army of Independence. He then tried to become dictator, but the republicans wouldn't have him. Half the country adores him and half execrates him. He has escaped from a dozen prisons and led a hundred forlorn hopes. A remarkable man, sir."

"He sounds a remarkable man," said Fleming

drily, "and one who might have a good many enemies."

"Ferdinand Harden has—I should say had—more enemies than most people."

"And what was he doing in your house, Sir Arthur?"

"I am chairman—" Sir Arthur looked down and gave a deprecating cough—"of a small society of which you probably have never even heard—the Anglo-Baltanian Society. I am connected by ties of commerce and early upbringing with that country. It is part of my duty as chairman—indeed, it is practically my sole duty—to entertain distinguished citizens of Baltania when they visit this country. Harden wrote and asked if he might stay here, and naturally I was glad to put him up."

"You knew him before?"

"I had met him many times, but we were never intimate. Our temperaments—" Sir Arthur looked round vaguely—"our temperaments were different."

Fleming tried for a moment to picture the amiable baronet escaping from prison and leading a forlorn hope, but, finding it a difficult task, he resumed his questions.

"What brought Harden to England?"

"I don't know the details. It was some financial deal he was arranging with William Marston."

"Marston?" Fleming glanced at the list of guests which Inspector Williams had drawn up. "He is staying in the house?"

"Yes."

"You invited him, I suppose, to meet Harden?"

"Yes. At Harden's request."

"He is a financier?"

"A very big one. He is a partner in Reinach's—bankers, you know. His name used to be Meyerstein, I believe."

"Now the finding of the body. I understand it was a maid who found it, and that then a Mr. Brookes was next on the scene. Who is he?"

"A friend of my daughter's," said Sir Arthur, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Modern fashions, you know, Inspector; my daughter has scores of friends, and I hardly know one from another. But they seem to be nice young fellows."

"And after Mr. Brookes, you came next?"

"Yes."

"And after you, Mr. Marston?"

"Yes."

"And after him?"

The baronet reflected. "After him no one, so far as I can remember."

"This window in the gunroom. Will you show me where it is?"

Sir Arthur jumped up with alacrity. "With pleasure. With the greatest of pleasure. Did Williams tell you? I found it myself."

"Lead on, sir," said Fleming.

The window in the gunroom was the ordinary sash type, in two halves, with a catch locking the two. A hole had been broken just above the catch on the upper half, making it possible for an arm to be inserted and the catch pushed back. The window was wide open, and a writing table below was covered with fragments of broken glass.

"There," said Sir Arthur proudly. "What do you think of that?"

"Very interesting," said Fleming slowly. "Very interesting indeed." He surveyed the scene, and then returned to the library. Sir Arthur looked a little crestfallen at the small attention that had been paid to his discovery, but followed meekly.

Fleming sat down and glanced at his watch.

"That will be all for the moment, Sir Arthur," he said. "I can't really get on until my assistant

has finished his investigations, but I have time for a word with Mr. Marston, if you have no objection."

"Objection? I? Dear me, no," exclaimed Waldingham. "I'll send him in at once. Or, rather, I'll ask him to come in. One doesn't send people of Marston's calibre, you know."

Mr. Marston entered, smoking a large cigar. His hand was steady, his dark eye was clear, and his manner was imperturbable.

"Inspector Fleming, I believe?" he said urbanely.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Marston?"

"Yes. You wish to ask me a few questions, Inspector?"

"Yes. Sir Arthur Waldingham tells me that this man Harden came over to England to see you on business."

"That is correct."

"What exactly was the business, Mr. Marston?"

The financier looked earnestly at the ash on the end of his cigar, deposited it carefully in an ash tray, and then raised his half-Oriental gaze.

"There is no reason why I should not tell you. Now that the man is dead the deal is off. Baltania, Inspector, is rich in minerals—much richer

than most people think. The present government has granted a concession to a Frankfort syndicate to exploit the mines. Mr. Harden wanted to upset the present government and become dictator. He had no money. He came to me. We made an arrangement. I was to finance his—his *coup d'état*. If it succeeded, he was to grant me the Frankfort concession. We met here to discuss the final details. That is all."

"I see. Then am I right in concluding that the Frankfort syndicate had a very strong interest in preventing the arrangement being concluded?"

"You are quite right."

"I take it, Mr. Marston, that Harden was more essential to your scheme than, say, you yourself."

"You are an intelligent man, Inspector. I am one of a group. If I had been removed, the arrangement would have stood. But Harden was unique. No one else could run a revolution with the faintest chance of success. At any rate, Reinach's wouldn't finance it," he added with a smile.

"There's a possible motive, anyway," said Fleming.

"I can tell you something more, Inspector. I heard the other day from a friend—a reliable

friend—that a rather celebrated German gentleman had been seen in Frankfort, and later in London."

"What is he celebrated for?"

"For the accuracy of his assassinations."

"Ah! Do you happen to know his name?"

"One of his names is Von Winckel."

Fleming wrote it down in his notebook.

"Can you tell me anything more?"

"I think not," said the financier thoughtfully, and moved to the door.

"One last question, sir," said Fleming. "And please don't answer it if you would prefer not to. If this revolution had succeeded, would you have stood to make a considerable amount of money?"

Mr. Marston blew an elegant smoke ring through a pair of lips that were rather well adapted for doing so, and said equably: "I don't see how I could have made less than a couple of millions."

"Thank you, sir," said Fleming, and the financier went out.

The next moment Sergeant Maitland came in and laid a paper in front of the inspector.

"Fingerprint report, sir," he said, "and the doctor would like to see you."

"Has he seen the body?"
"Yes, sir."
"Well, what is it, Maitland? Out with it."
"The man was stabbed seven times, sir."
"Ask the doctor to come in."

CHAPTER IV

THE MURDERED RAKE

THE doctor had little of interest to report beyond the bare fact of the seven stabs. Death had undoubtedly taken place during the stabbing. The last blow, and possibly several before it, had been struck at an already dead man. The time of the attack was roughly placed by the doctor as "some time between ten o'clock last night and four o'clock this morning." After the medical man had retired, Fleming turned to his assistant.

"Now for your fingerprints," he said.

"There's not much, sir, I'm afraid," answered the sergeant. "The handle of the knife had been wiped."

"No glove marks?"

"No sir. Looks to me as if it had been wiped."

"Any others?"

"The blood mark on the balustrade might have been a glove, sir. At any rate, there are no fingerprints. There's a very clear one, though, on the handle of the bed-room door."

"Which door?" asked Fleming sharply.

"The one the man was lying in front of. It's the man's own print, sir."

"Aha! So he was trying to get in, was he? Whose bedroom was it?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Never mind. Go and ask Sir Arthur to come and speak to me for a moment; then go and search the body, bring the knife down here, and get the locals to clear away the—er—the débris. We've finished with it. And send one of them down to the post office with this wire to Von Hoffmann in Berlin."

"Have you got any ideas, sir?" asked the sergeant tentatively.

"I've got a thumping big motive, at all events," answered Fleming. "Several million pounds seem to have been at stake."

The sergeant whistled respectfully at the mention of such a large sum and went out, while the inspector took out of his pocket the plan of the house which his colleague had sketched. The bedrooms on the first floor were extremely simple. The long corridor terminated at one end in the back staircase and at the other in a suite of two rooms and a bathroom. On one side of the corridor there were three bedrooms; on the other

there were two. As he was studying the plan, Sir Arthur came in and looked over his shoulder.

"Oh, yes," he said. "That's Williams's plan, isn't it? He hadn't finished it, you know."

"I want your help in finishing it," said Fleming. "I've got everything except the names of the occupants of the rooms."

"Oh, yes, certainly. Of course. By all means. Let me see now. That one at the end was Harden's, and next to it his bathroom. Next to him is Harden's secretary, and that one is my daughter Celia's."

Fleming started. "That's the one where the body was found," he said.

"Yes," answered the baronet simply.

"Dear me," said Fleming. "Go on."

"Opposite Celia's is mine, and next door to mine is Root's—Florian Root. The suite at the far end past the stairs is Marston's."

Fleming filled in the names.

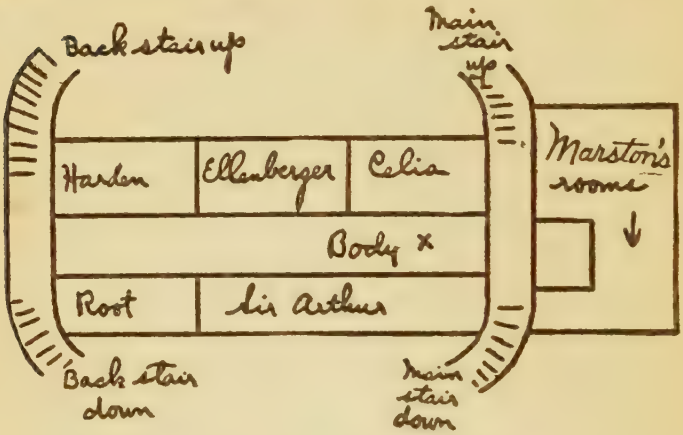
"And on the second floor?" he asked.

"There are five bedrooms—or is it six?—yes, six. But only two are being used. Young Brookes is up there, and Lavender Arlington."

Fleming looked up. "If I understand the position correctly, Sir Arthur, when the housemaid

dropped her tray and screamed, only you and Mr. Marston on the first floor heard her, Mr. Brookes on the second, and almost everyone in the attics."

"I don't say we were the only people who



Plan of First Floor

heard it. We were the only people who came out."

"That's rather odd," commented Fleming, and Sir Arthur at once assumed a slightly defensive tone. "Celia was out bathing," he said, as if he was determined that his daughter should not be accused of oddity.

"And this Mr. Root? Was he bathing too?"

"Oh, no. Not to-day. You see, he's gone."

"Oh? Then why do you say it's his room if he's gone?"

Sir Arthur became a little confused.

"Florian's a funny fellow," he said. "He comes and goes and never says a word about it to anyone. He went away day before yesterday morning—no one saw him go—but he's left all his stuff here, and so of course he'll be back at any moment."

"I see. And Harden's secretary? Have you any idea why he didn't come when the hullabaloo started?"

"No, I haven't. By Jove, though, that reminds me. I haven't seen the fellow all morning. He didn't come down to breakfast. That's rather fishy, isn't it?"

"Perhaps," said Fleming cautiously, and then he went on briskly: "Well, that's all for the moment, sir. Sorry to have to keep on bringing you backward and forward like this all the time."

"Anything I can do to help," began Sir Arthur politely, and tailed off into a murmur in which the words "only too pleased" and "every citizen's duty" were alone audible.

Sergeant Maitland came in and laid the knife

with which the murder had been committed upon the table, and beside it a crumpled strip of paper.

"Can I send someone else into the inquisitorial chamber?" asked Sir Arthur, with his hand upon the doorknob, but it was to Maitland that Fleming spoke.

"What's this?"

"Found in the dead man's dressing-gown pocket, sir."

Fleming smoothed out the strip, looked at it, and then raised his eyes to the door.

"Yes, please," he said thoughtfully. "I should like a word or two with your daughter."

Sir Arthur stared hard at him for an instant, and then, with the words, "Certainly, of course," he went out.

Celia Waldingham was tall and dark and graceful and beautiful. But, curiously enough, people who admired her seldom mentioned or thought of her beauty as her chief claim to admiration. Everyone admitted that she was beautiful, but few people emphasized it. Her supreme quality was her capacity to feel interested in the affairs of others. She was not merely a good listener. She was a fascinated listener. She

had been known to sit through a description, lasting for an hour and a quarter, by old Sir Hector Bellingdale of his journey through Assam in the 'seventies, including a verbatim report of what the chief of a local tribe said to him and what he replied. And at the end of the description Celia had said: "Didn't you once travel through Burma, too, Sir Hector?" She was twenty-four years of age, an only child, and had, at a reasonable and conservative estimate, about three million adorers.

Fleming had heard faintly of her fame as a beauty, and had seen photographs of her in illustrated papers in barbers' shops, and at his dentist's. But even his dour Scottish pulse missed half a beat when Celia came into the library. She sat down and bent her dark eyes upon the detective.

"My father said you wanted to see me, Mr.—Mr.——"

"Fleming is my name—Inspector Fleming."

She bowed slightly.

"I want you to tell me, Miss Waldingham, everything you know about Ferdinand Harden. I don't mean about his life or past or anything of that sort—I can get that from other sources—

but I mean everything you know which nobody else can know."

"I don't think I quite . . ." began Celia doubtfully.

"I'll speak bluntly," interposed Fleming. "What was the position between you two?"

"The position," answered the girl in a level voice, "the position was that Ferdinand Harden told me that he was in love with me, and I told him that I was not in love with him."

"He wanted you to marry him, in fact?"

"Not exactly," said Celia, with a faint smile.

"I see."

"His idea was to take me back to Baltania with him next week, and after his revolution had succeeded he would be in a position to remove his wife."

"He was married?"

"Yes, but he never let that worry him."

"You mean that he was what is called a ladies' man?"

"Very much so. He was famous in half the capitals of Europe."

"And do you know what his wife thought about it all?"

"Her opinion wasn't asked," said Celia drily.

"And his idea of taking you back to Baltania

with him—that didn't meet with your approval?"

"No."

"Now, Miss Waldingham," said Fleming, leaning forward, "you know that Harden's body was found outside your bedroom door?"

"I do," she replied in a low voice.

"And you know that he had been trying to get into your room?"

Celia was startled. The colour vanished from her cheeks for an instant and then came flooding back.

"How do you know?" she whispered.

"His fingerprints were on the door handle. Quite unmistakable."

Celia lowered her eyes to the carpet and wrapped herself in an inscrutable silence. The detective gazed at her intently, and then said sharply: "Was your door locked?"

She looked up, and answered simply, "No."

"And you heard nothing in the night?"

"No."

"Are you a heavy sleeper?"

"No. I'm a light sleeper."

"And yet you slept through the housemaid's yelling at a quarter to seven."

"I wasn't in my room at a quarter to seven.

I went out by the balcony and down the fire-escape ladder to have a bathe."

"Was that a common custom of yours?"

"I don't usually bathe as early as all that, but it was a lovely morning, and I woke up at six with a headache."

"Do you often have headaches?"

"Very seldom."

"There's just one other point," said Fleming casually. "It's this note which was found in Harden's dressing gown this morhing. It runs:

"Come to-night at one precisely. Second door from yours. C. W."

He was watching her intently. "Does that convey anything to you?"

"Nothing," she replied coolly, and then added, "The initials are the same as mine."

"Is the writing the same as yours?" He passed the slip across to her.

She looked at it, and her brows contracted into a frown.

"No. It's not in the least like mine." She walked across the room to a desk, pulled a bundle of letters out of a pigeonhole, and selected two or three. "These are specimens of my writing," she said. "They are letters I wrote to father

at Christmas when I was winter-sporting at Mürren."

"And you know nothing of this note?"

"Nothing."

"In that case the note was written to Harden by someone who wanted to decoy him into the corridor at one o'clock in the morning."

"It might be," she answered.

"Have you any idea who that someone might be?"

"None."

Fleming, acute and experienced observer of faces, saw the faint compression of the lips and the almost imperceptible look of defiance in the brilliant eyes that accompanied the monosyllable, and said to himself: "Oh, yes, you have, my young woman. You've got a jolly shrewd idea who that someone might be."

He got up and opened the door.

"Thank you very much for your valuable assistance, Miss Waldingham," he said formally. "By the way, is Mr. Marston in love with you?"

"No," she replied with a laugh.

"And Mr. Brookes?"

"You've no right to ask it, you know, and I've no real right to tell you," she began, but Fleming held up his hand.

"I'm afraid that that gives me my answer."

Celia shrugged her shoulders and turned on her heel. Fleming went back into the library, lit a pipe, and sat down in a comfortable chair to consider the problem.

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST STONE RABBIT

Inspector Fleming had been pondering for about twenty minutes over the information he had so far been able to collect when the door of the library burst open and a large, fair-haired, broad-shouldered man rushed in, shouting unintelligibly and gesticulating. Behind him followed Sir Arthur, flapping his hands feebly, and Sergeant Maitland, who wore the grim, determined countenance of a Hippodrome chucker-out.

"Now, then, out of this," he was beginning, but the blond giant paid no attention and continued his flood of sounds. Sir Arthur at length succeeded in quieting him, and turned apologetically to Fleming.

"It's Harden's secretary," he explained. "He's only just heard of the murder."

"Why?" asked Fleming.

"Why? Why? Why?" stuttered the man violently. He apparently knew a little English, but

his emotions were too strong for his linguistic attainments and he relapsed into his native Baltanian.

"He says he was doped," interjected Sir Arthur. "He only woke up half an hour ago, at about half-past eleven, with a splitting headache."

"Headaches seem rather fashionable this morning," murmured Fleming.

"He was Harden's bodyguard as well as secretary," went on Waldingham, still with the air of a man offering profound apologies for some unpardonable error of taste, "and it was his business to follow Harden about and protect him."

"Well, what does he want with me?" asked Fleming. "Has he got any information for me, or is he just letting off general expressions of good will?"

"He says he knows who did it."

"Stout fellow. And who did do it?"

There was a rapid exchange of mysterious sounds between Sir Arthur and the bodyguard, and then the former interpreted.

"He says there's a society called the Sons of Liberty who had sworn to kill Harden. They're red-hot Republicans, and Harden, you know—well, he wanted to destroy the Republic and

make himself dictator." Sir Arthur's voice trailed off.

"So they wanted to destroy him," commented Fleming.

"Exactly." The baronet liked people who spoke his words for him, and went on: "Harden had been warned that they would try to murder him over here."

There was another cataract of sound from the Baltanian which, when interpreted, resolved itself into an offer to supply the names of the most prominent Sons of Liberty.

"It will keep him busy, anyway," agreed Fleming. "But he needn't bother to write them all down. Tell him to put down only the ones who can speak English. Even the most perfervid Son of Liberty wouldn't be such an ass as to let loose those noises here and expect to pass unnoticed. Take him away. Not you, Maitland. I want you. Perhaps you would be so kind as to take him away, Sir Arthur."

When the two detectives were alone, Fleming ran his fingers through his hair in perplexity.

"The first thing in a murder case, Maitland, my boy, is to look for the motive. I've been looking for the motive and I've found three. That's no good, you know. First, there's the

financial syndicate in Frankfort—by the way, you sent off that wire?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then there's what you might call the human motive. I can imagine lots of people going to considerable lengths to prevent that man going into that girl's room. And now there's this comic turn, the Sons of Liberty. Of course, some of the Sons may be real fanatics, in which case it won't be quite so comic. Fanatics are no joke. But, apart from fanatics, these secret societies rather leave me cold."

"Do you think it was an inside job, sir, or an outside job?"

"I'm pretty certain that it's an inside job. If everything I've heard to-day is true, which may or may not be the case, it must be inside. That note with the position of the bedrooms, the doping of the secretary, and, perhaps, the doping of Miss Celia—all that must have been done by someone who had the run of the place."

Fleming reflected for a moment and then said:

"All the same, I'll take a stroll in the garden. Maitland, I want you to go through Brother Ferdinand's bedroom first, then his secretary's, then mademoiselle's, and after that the rest of them in any order you like. It'll keep you pretty

busy all day. Let me know at intervals how you're getting on. And keep a good look-out for the boots or shoes that stepped in the pool of blood."

"Very good, sir."

Fleming strolled quietly out of the front door of Westbrook and paused to get a general impression of the grounds. A wide, gravelled avenue, flanked with thick rhododendrons, stretched out before him, ending a quarter of a mile away in the gate which led directly on to the main road. On each side of the rows of rhododendrons were conventional lawns and flower beds, shrubberies which half concealed greenhouses, gardeners' sheds, and cucumber frames, and wholly concealed the garden wall; there were a rockery, a small shallow pond of water lilies, and, in fact, all the customary signs and traces of the work of an expert head gardener and a multitude of underlings.

Fleming surveyed the scene, and involuntarily compared it to his own tiny patch of garden in Highgate—the apple tree with its smoked leaves, the grimy paling, and the distant but incessant whistling of butchers' boys. Then with a smile he wandered round the house and looked at the other side. There was much less gar-

dening in evidence. First came three grass tennis-courts, and then, beyond them, a stretch of mossy grass running down to the edge of the Thames.

Having pigeonholed in his mind a general impression of the lie of the land, the detective proceeded to examine one or two details. First he made a careful scrutiny of the outside of the gun-room window and the ground beneath it. He was smiling faintly to himself as he began, but the smile slowly vanished until, at the end, he put his magnifying glass back into his waistcoat pocket and stared in amazement at the sky.

"Well, dash my buttons!" was his somewhat inelegant comment, and a pleasant voice behind him at once replied:

"Don't mind me. Say something stronger."

Fleming was annoyed at the interruption, and still more so at being overheard and watched. He whipped round, and came face to face with a young man of about seven or eight and twenty, clean-shaven, good-looking, and pleasant-spoken.

"Mr. Fleming, I presume," the stranger added, before Fleming could speak. "My name is Brookes."

"Ah! The first man on the scene," said the detective. "And may I ask what you are doing out here, Mr. Brookes, when I specially

asked that everyone should remain indoors?"

"I've only come to ask if you'll stay the night here. Celia wants to know."

Fleming looked keenly at him.

"That's the poorest excuse I ever heard," he said, "for trying to hamper a police officer at his work."

"Oh, I say," protested the young man. "I'm not trying to hamper you. But it wasn't in human nature to stay indoors when you real, genuine, home-brewed sleuths are creeping up the drain pipes and crawling about on hands and knees all round us."

Fleming smiled at the frankness of this second explanation.

"Well, as you're here," he said, "you might as well stay and answer a question or two."

"Rather," exclaimed Mr. Brookes delightedly. "I'm your man. Fire away."

Fleming considered a moment, and then decided to fire away with his heaviest gun.

"What did you think of Ferdinand Harden?" he inquired.

The good-looking face of the young man darkened into a scowl.

"I thought him an absolute and complete swine," he replied.

"Why?"

"Why? Because—because—oh, because he was such a swine," Brookes concluded lamely.

"And a very good reason," said Fleming. "What public school were you at?"

The scowl vanished in a look of surprise. "Winchester. Why?"

"I just wondered. Then Oxford?"

"Yes. New College."

"I expect you played a lot of games at both places, Mr. Brookes. Football and cricket and so on."

"Yes. I still play whenever I can."

"And you naturally dislike a foreigner who doesn't play games."

The scowl showed signs of returning. "Yes, the swine! Never did a thing all day but run after women."

"They say he was rather a hero in his own line," Fleming observed casually.

Brookes rose to the bait instantly. "Hero be damned! He was a counter-jumper, a sweep of the first class."

"Now tell me, Mr. Brookes, what do you suppose Harden was doing in the corridor at that time of night?"

"One of his confounded intrigues, I suppose."

"Did you know that the marks prove clearly that he had tried to get into Miss Waldingham's room?"

The colour sprang into the young man's cheeks, and he clenched his fists unconsciously. But, when he spoke, it was in a quiet and restrained voice. "In that case," he remarked, "you can count me among the supporters of the man who did him in."

"If you'd found him with his hand upon Miss Waldingham's door——"

"I'd have done him in, too."

"I take it you didn't," said Fleming lightly, but young Brookes treated the suggestion seriously and answered gravely:

"I did not have that honour."

"Thank you," said the detective. "That is all I want at the moment."

When he was alone, he walked back to the gun-room window and contemplated it again. Then he shook his head and went on round the garden. The next object of his attention was the flower bed below Celia Waldingham's window. Although the weather had been dry and fine for some days, and the ground was hard, it was possible to detect footmarks which might easily have been made that morning.

"She might have made these when she went out bathing," murmured Fleming. "She certainly went out, because Williams saw her coming back."

Looking up, he could see the coiled rope ladder, which served as a fire escape, lying on the balcony outside Celia Waldingham's room, and he made a mental note to examine the condition of the balcony, and particularly of the iron bar over which the rope ladder had to be thrown when in use. A few yards beyond the foot-marked flower bed Fleming came on a very singular object. It was a stone rabbit of the kind that occasionally takes the place of the more usual Cupid as a garden ornament, lying on its side on the edge of the lawn. A stout chain was fixed firmly round its neck and another round its body; the loose ends of the chains were about a yard long. It looked as if someone had used them for dragging the rabbit along with, but Fleming could see no signs of it having been dragged across the lawn or along the path. Even the finest and driest summer could not harden the ground sufficiently to conceal all trace of the passage of such a comparatively heavy object.

The detective examined it carefully, and then

strode off in the direction of the greenhouses, returning in a few moments with a gardener.

"Have you ever seen that before?" he demanded, confronting the man with the figure of the prostrate rabbit.

"Lord bless my soul!" ejaculated the gardener. "If it isn't the top of the gate post! Someone took it away day before yesterday, sir."

"Took it away?" exclaimed Fleming in surprise.

"At least, it may have been before, but I only noticed it day before yesterday—noticed that it was gone, I mean."

"Well, they've brought it back again, anyway."

"Yes, sir, and I'm very glad to see it. But why is it all done up in chains like that?"

"Ah! There you have me. It wasn't here yesterday, was it?"

"It was not, sir. I passed by this very spot at half-past eight, sir, and there was no rabbit then, that I'll swear. May I take it, sir? It belongs down by the boat house."

"You can have it in half an hour."

The gardener departed, and Fleming walked along the outside of the house till he was opposite the window of Harden's bedroom. He

shouted for Maitland, and in a moment the sergeant's face appeared at the window.

"I want you down here a moment, Maitland, with your finger-print apparatus."

"I was just coming down, sir," said the sergeant, and he disappeared, and emerged a moment or two later round the house.

"Try that stone rabbit for prints, and the chains," said Fleming. "and, by the way, Maitland. I'm not at all sure now that there wasn't someone outside after all. That gun-room window, which looked such an obvious fake—well, there are marks on the sill and on the ground below."

"Even though the ground's so hard?" said the sergeant in surprise.

"It's not as hard as all that," said Fleming. "What were you coming down for?"

"I found this in Harden's bedroom, sir. Screwed up in a little ball and pitched into the grate. I thought I'd bring it down at once."

He handed to Fleming a crumpled strip of paper on which was written:

Come to-night at one precisely. Second door from yours.

CHAPTER VI

THE LOVELY LAVENDER

"'Come to-night at one precisely. Second door from yours,'" said Fleming aloud. "What a remarkable thing." He pulled the first strip of paper, which had been found in Harden's pocket, out of his notebook and looked at it. "Different writing," he remarked. "Different writing and the same words, except for the initials. Now, what on earth is the meaning of that? It was silly enough to write one note to a man like Harden; but to write two, it isn't humanly possible. Maitland, ring up the Yard and ask for the handwriting fellow—what's his name?"

"Anderson, sir," put in the sergeant.

"That's right. Anderson. Ask if he can be spared for an hour to-day, and, if so, whether he can be sent down at once."

"Very good, sir."

"Any answer to the Berlin telegram yet?"

"No, sir."

"All right. And, when you're speaking to the

Yard, you might say I could do with a couple of extra men for running messages and digging up bodies and teaching me Baltanian and so on."

Sergeant Maitland, a native of Clackmannan, had never been known to smile in his life except once, when someone said in his presence that Englishmen could play football, and he accepted his chief's instructions with the profoundest gravity.

Fleming grinned cheerfully at the broad back of his retreating assistant and returned to the consideration of the stone rabbit.

"If you weren't there yesterday evening, Mr. Peter Rabbit," he reflected, "you must have arrived during the night. But why did you arrive? That's the point. Were you intended as a weight to drag a dead body to the bottom of the river?"

Fleming was struck by this idea, but, the more he considered, the more insuperable seemed the objections to it. The rabbit, according to the gardener, came from a gate down by the boathouse. Why should anyone take the trouble to lug a heavy bit of stone from the river to the house in order simply to lug it back again? Anyone but a madman would take the body down to the stone. Again, why steal the rabbit two days

earlier? And why, having stolen it, hide it for two days and then bring it back again? Only a madman would have done that.

"Of course," muttered Fleming, "if a loony is about the place, it might account for the wild, unnecessary stabbing, it might just conceivably account for the two notes——" But he broke off impatiently. "I don't believe it," he growled, and went back into the house and summoned the local inspector.

"Look here, Williams," he began abruptly, "I've got a job for you."

The other's face brightened perceptibly. He was getting rather bored with doing nothing, and he was beginning to resent faintly the total absence of consultation and coöperation with his London colleague.

"There's just a faint chance," went on Fleming, "that there might be—or, rather, that there might have been—one or more of these Baltanian fellows hanging about the neighbourhood during the last few days. It seems that there was a comic show called the Sons of Liberty, who'd sworn by the nine gods——"

"Nine of them!" ejaculated Inspector Williams. "The heathen villains!"

"Well, they'd sworn, anyway, to do in this

Harden fellow. You know what secret societies mostly are—all talk and swearing oaths—but there might be something in it. I'd be very much obliged if you'd make some inquiries about it, and let me have the result as soon as possible."

"Certainly, certainly," exclaimed Williams eagerly, and he bustled away to mobilize some of his men.

"And now," said Fleming to Sir Arthur, who poked his head out of the billiard room at that moment, "and now I could do with some bread and cheese, a tankard of beer, if you have such a thing, and a few minutes' conversation with the lady whose name I've forgotten but who occupied a room on the second floor."

"You mean Lavender?" exclaimed Sir Arthur in surprise.

"That's right. But why the astonishment?"

"I never heard of anyone forgetting her name before." Sir Arthur's head vanished round the door and reappeared again in an instant. "I say, Fleming, do you want us to stay in here all day?"

"Not all day. Only until my man has finished his—his investigations." Fleming substituted the word for the less tactful word "search," that had been on the tip of his tongue.

"But, of course, you can go into the dining room for lunch," he added.

"Oh, thank you. Thank you very much," said the baronet, and he vanished again.

Fleming went back to his table in the library, and the next moment Miss Lavender Arlington swept into the room.

She was a magnificent sight. Six feet tall, with a superb figure, the carriage of an empress, and a crown of golden-red hair, she would have dominated any assembly by her appearance alone, even without her personality. But, in addition to her physical splendour, she was the possessor of a very pronounced individuality. Her career upon the musical comedy stage had been meteoric. She had shot from apprenticeship to leading rôles almost in twenty-four hours and for the last six years she had kept London interested, amused, and slightly annoyed by her incessant publicity, her occasional fits of sudden and overwhelming temper, her selfishness, her audacity, her readiness at any moment to let down a management, a fellow-performer, an author, or an audience, for no, apparently, particular reason, and her equally unaccountable fits of impulsive generosity. There were many critics who asserted that her singing was not so

good as it was loud; but who listens to critics, anyway? Miss Arlington could fill a house for the first six months of any musical comedy. After that send-off the pieces had to run on their own merits, but for the first six months Miss Arlington was all that was necessary.

This, then, was the lady who swept in upon Fleming as if he were a crowded Gaiety. The detective was immensely amused and delighted.

"Miss Arlington?" he said, in an intentionally doubtful tone.

The actress shot a surprised glance at him from her dark, brilliant eyes.

"Of course. Who did you think it was? The Kaiser?"

Fleming brought a chair forward, but she waved it aside, leaned her elbow on the mantelpiece, and began to study intently her long, white, jewelled fingers.

"I prefer to stand," she said. "Go on. What do you want?"

"First of all, I want to know if you heard anything during the night?"

"Nothing."

"Are you usually a light sleeper?"

"No, I sleep soundly. I've a clear conscience, you see."

"And you slept right through the maid's yellings and shoutings on the stairs?"

"Oh, dear me, no. I wasn't in the house then. I went out at about six o'clock."

"What for?"

"A motor drive."

"A common thing for you to do?"

"Never did such a thing before in my life." She opened her bag, drew out a be-diamonded cigarette holder, and very deliberately lit a cigarette. Her hand was perfectly steady, and, after blowing an elegant smoke ring, she turned her head to face Fleming and said with a dazzling smile: "A steady hand. That's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

"It was," admitted Fleming grimly. "I was admiring it for its steadiness. And why did you go for your early morning drive?"

"I woke early, saw it was a lovely morning, had an impulse, got up, took out my car, went for a drive." She waved her hand lightly and added, "*Voilà tout.*"

"And where did you go to?"

"Round the countryside." She swept her arm this time in a wide gesture, as if to convey the impression of a spacious horizon.

"Nowhere in particular?"

"No."

Fleming assumed a confidential tone, and his next words were spoken almost apologetically. "It's a rule in my profession, Miss Arlington—and a very annoying rule it often is—that whenever we get hold of a fact we have to try and check it. If it's a statement by someone, we have to try and get it confirmed by someone else. It's a matter of routine. Is there anyone who can check your statement about your drive?"

The actress looked him full in the face, and, after an instant, replied:

"Not that I know of."

"It doesn't really matter," said Fleming casually. "By the way, how did you get out of the house?"

For the first time the actress was taken unawares, and the ash was jerked off the cigarette on to the mantelpiece. She recovered swiftly, and answered coolly, "By the front door."

"Which you reached—how?"

"By the back stairs!"

"You went down the back stairs, and actually crossed the end of the corridor on which the body was lying?"

"I went down quickly, and didn't look along the corridor."

Fleming tried another tack.

"When did you last see Mr. Harden?"

"At half-past eleven or thereabouts; in the library."

"Was he afraid of any impending danger? Did he talk of people being on his track?"

Lavender Arlington unconsciously drew herself up, and replied disdainfully:

"Ferdinand Harden was afraid of nothing, and no man in the world has ever lived so incessantly in danger."

"What did you think of him as a man, Miss Arlington?"

"He was the greatest man who ever lived," she replied, with an unexpected simplicity. Fleming got the impression that they were the first unstudied, genuinely sincere words she had uttered in the course of the interview.

"And have you a theory, an idea, who killed him?"

"There isn't the slightest doubt why he was killed." It was not the actress, but the woman who was talking now. "I warned him a hundred times not to try any of his Don Juan stuff on

other men's girls. He was asking for trouble. Sooner or later it was bound to come. And it has."

Her lustrous eyes were flashing in a way that Fleming thought a little frightening.

"The damned fool!" she added bitterly.

"It appears, Miss Arlington, that you knew him well."

"I ought to," she returned, with an ironic smile. "I was his mistress for four years."

There was a slight silence, which Fleming broke in his most matter-of-fact tone.

"Then, if you will be kind enough to comply with one more routine regulation and give me a specimen of your handwriting, I won't trouble you any more—for the present."

Lavender Arlington pulled out a gold pencil from her bag and scribbled a few words carelessly on the back of an envelope.

"May I go back to town, Mr. Policeman? I'm rehearsing a new show."

"I'm afraid not to-day, Miss Arlington. No one is allowed to leave to-day."

"I didn't expect it." She nodded carelessly, and strode out.

"The devil!" exclaimed Fleming. "There's something fishy about her. But what is it?" He

marched up and down the room, racking his brains to find the correct word to describe the mood and behaviour of the actress. "She wasn't frightened," he muttered, "nor defiant, nor worried, nor confident, nor ignorant, nor innocent, nor guilty, if it comes to that. Most peculiar."

One of the local constables tapped discreetly and entered.

"A telegram, sir," he said diffidently, laying the envelope on the desk, "and the reporters want to know, sir, if you can make a statement to them any time to-day."

Fleming glanced at his watch. It was nearly two o'clock.

"Yes," he said, "I'll see them in ten minutes."

He opened the telegram, and found that it was a reply to his wire to Von Hoffmann, Chief of the Berlin Police. It ran as follows:

MAN DESCRIBED IN YOUR TELEGRAM BELIEVED TO HAVE LEFT FOR ENGLAND FOUR DAYS AGO STOP HOFFMANN LEFT FOR LONDON YESTERDAY WITH EXTRADITION REQUEST STOP WE WANT MAN ON MURDER CHARGE IN CHARLOTTENBURG SIGNED MÖLLENDOF.

"Any answer, sir?" asked the constable.

"No. But ring up the Yard at once and ask

that Herr von Hoffmann be asked to come down here immediately, if he can spare the time."

The next ten minutes were devoted to bread and cheese and beer, and then Fleming went into the big dining room to meet the gentlemen of the press. There were about twenty of them, and the inspector gave them a short and guarded outline of what had occurred. He mentioned the Sons of Liberty, and hinted at the possibility that one of them had been connected in some way with the murder.

"I know the Sons of Liberty," remarked a tall, elderly, bearded man at the end of the room. "There are some dangerous men among them."

Fleming was interested. "It's not so much the dangerous ones that I've been considering as the ones who can speak English."

"There are several who are fluent," replied the journalist. "Exiles in London before the war."

"Could you get me their names and descriptions?"

"I doubt it, but I could wire to my paper and ask them, if it would be of any use."

"What is your paper?"

"The *Kurjer Baltaszy*. I'm the London correspondent."

Fleming made a note of the name, and then he stopped and looked up.

"The *Kurjer Baltaszy*? You are the man who was on the spot so early this morning?"

"I have only just arrived," said the journalist in surprise.

"I have a note here," rejoined Fleming, "that the London correspondent of the *Kurjer Baltaszy* arrived in the neighbourhood last night to interview Harden, and came to this house at nine o'clock to see the body."

The journalists were excited, partly with envy at such a scoop and partly with admiration at the professional skill of the confrère who had achieved it, and craned forward to look at the Baltanian correspondent. The latter, however, shrugged his shoulders and said:

"There must be a mistake."

"Have you an assistant?"

"Yes. But he's on holiday in Finland."

Fleming rang the bell, and a policeman answered it.

"Inspector Williams, please. Will you ask him to step this way for a moment? Ah! Williams," he went on, "that correspondent this morning, did he leave a card?"

"Yes. Here it is." Williams laid a large card on the table on which was written:

MR. GEORG PIIP
LONDON CORRESPONDENT OF THE
Kurjer Baltaszy

The elderly, bearded man examined it.

"There is no such man. It is a swindle."

"Just as a matter of form," said Fleming with a smile, "I suppose you can prove to me that you're not—what you call a swindle?"

Two or three of the journalists laughed, and the *Daily Scream* reporter said:

"We all know old Big Willy. He's always about the place."

"They call me Big Willy," said the Baltanian with a sigh, "ever since the Kaiser grew a beard."

There was a general laugh at this, and Fleming returned to business.

"Well, gentlemen, I think I can give you a little more information, and I think that you may be able to help me. Inspector Williams will furnish you with a description of this bogus journalist, and I would be glad if you would do your best to get publicity for it. I want a word or two with him."

"Mr. Fleming," one of the journalists called

after him as he was leaving the room, "is it true that Lavender Arlington is staying in the house?"

"It is," conceded Fleming cautiously.

"She didn't do it, I suppose?" put in another. "That would make some story."

"You never can tell," said the detective with a grin. "But, boys, just remember this: No interviewing, please. Run along and get off your stories, and don't hang about here. Go on. Beat it."

The reporters, most of whom knew Fleming well from long experience, proceeded to beat it, and the inspector went upstairs to see how Maitland was getting on with his search. He found that the sergeant had finished the rooms of Harden and his secretary and was at work in Celia Waldingham's room.

"Any luck, Maitland?"

"Not much, sir. An empty bottle in Harden's room with his fingerprints on it—some sort of sleeping draught I should say it was—and a whole lot of papers in the queerest-looking language I ever saw. The secretary's room was full of papers, too. They seemed to carry about a perfect arsenal of weapons, sir. Three pistols each, all loaded; Harden had a life preserver

and the secretary a long knife and a pair of knuckledusters."

"What jolly people," murmured Fleming. "Anything of interest in Miss Celia's room?"

"Nothing yet, sir."

"No trace of those boots that trod in the pool of blood?"

"No, sir."

Fleming opened the long window, stepped out on to the balcony, and carefully examined the topmost bar of the balcony. There was no doubt whatever that quite recently the rope ladder had been thrown over.

"That part of her story might be true," he said to himself. "But, then, everybody's story might be true."

He went downstairs, and gave instructions that a call should be sent out to all stations within a radius of fifty miles of Pangbourne asking for information about the movements of Miss Lavender Arlington's large two-seater car in the hours before eight o'clock that morning.

CHAPTER VII

BLOODSTAINS IN THE PUNT

It was at about five o'clock in the afternoon that Sergeant Maitland finished his search and the house party were released from their parole and allowed to resume, more or less, their normal activities. The only stipulation was that they should not leave the grounds. It was only natural that, after being shut up in the house on a glorious summer afternoon, they should have instinctively moved to the garden, and Celia ordered tea on the lawn which led down to the river. It was, therefore, a little surprising that Leslie Brookes and herself were the only ones to take advantage of the shade of the plane trees and the long deck chairs. Mr. Marston had said that he never took tea, and, in any case, had a great deal of work to do; Sir Arthur felt vaguely that it was his duty to be on hand in case Fleming wanted him at any moment; and Lavender Arlington had disappeared from view without a word.

In ordinary circumstances, Leslie Brookes

would have blessed the souls of Mr. Marston, Sir Arthur, and Miss Arlington for leaving him alone with Celia, but the shadow of the tragedy lay heavily across them, and they both felt ill-at-ease. There was a long silence at first, lasting for several minutes that seemed to Leslie like hours. At last he felt that something must be done about it, and he remarked as casually as he could:

"I wonder what's happened to Florian?"

"Gone to one of his auction sales, I should think, and forgotten what house he was staying in. He'll remember in a day or two, and then he'll come back."

"He's a queer old bird."

"I'm very fond of him," said Celia.

"I know you are," was the unenthusiastic reply.

Conversation languished again after this effort, until Celia launched a topic.

"Didn't you think Lavender had been crying this morning?"

"I thought she was a bit red round the eyes, but I put it down to too much brandy last night. She had three goes at the liqueur brandy and at least two brandies-and-sodas before she went to bed."

"I thought she'd been crying."

"Well, it's not surprising if she had been," said Leslie in a judicial tone, or in what he imagined a judicial tone to be. "After all, she was his mistress for years."

"What a beast he was!" said Celia passionately. "A beast—an unutterable beast!"

"Do you think he deserved what he got?" asked the young man quietly.

"Yes."

"And you feel no repulsion towards the murderer?"

"Ah! that's different. One can hate the man without being sympathetic to the man who stabbed him in the back."

"The man or woman," said Brookes in a low voice, and Celia's cup rattled in its saucer as she stretched out her arm to put it down.

"What do you mean?"

"Had anyone better cause to hate Harden than a discarded mistress?"

After a moment Celia said, "Yes, I think so."

"Who?"

"Well, people who—people who—were in danger of the same fate. Don't you think they might hate him too?"

"But not to the point of murder."

"Perhaps not. But there are lots of other motives for murder. Politics, for instance."

Leslie leant forward and lowered his voice.

"Celia, you know I was left on guard after the body had been discovered, until the police arrived. Well, I didn't touch anything, of course, but I couldn't help looking. Celia, he was stabbed half a dozen times, not just once. That isn't a political murder. It's a wild, passionate, mad sort of murder. The professional assassin doesn't stand over the body, jabbing away at it. He gives one jolly good quick one and clears out."

"How do you know so much about it?"

"I don't; but it's common sense."

"It might be a blind."

"I don't think so, and I'm sure that sandy-haired Scotsman doesn't think so either."

"You mean the inspector?"

"Yes."

Celia drew a pattern on the grass with the tip of her shoe, and said without conviction, "It might have been a political fanatic."

"It might have been," retorted Brookes, "but I'm jolly sure it wasn't."

Celia raised her eyes and looked at the young man

"I know what you're driving at, you've no right to do it. You haven't a shadow of evidence."

"Why did she go out this morning of all mornings and not come back again till after eight? Do you mean to tell me it was a coincidence?"

"Why did I go out to bathe on this morning of all mornings?" she parried.

"Because you had a headache."

"She might have had a headache too."

"Look here, Celia, it won't do, and you know it won't. Lavender may be innocent—I hope she is—but, whether she's innocent or guilty, she's got a lot to explain. What was she doing in this house at all, for instance?"

"She invited herself down."

"Exactly. Why? She knew her former lover, who had discarded her, was going to be here, and she followed him down. She went into the library with him last night after that game of snooker and had the hell of a row with him."

"How do you know?"

"Because I heard them going at it hammer and tongs. What was the row about? Has that come out? Where did she go this morning in the car? Has that come out?"

"She may have told Fleming."

"She may have. And, again, she may not."

"Well, what do you think she did?"

Leslie lowered his voice again, and said:

"When I was on guard I couldn't help seeing that someone had walked into the pool of blood."

Celia shuddered.

"Sorry," he exclaimed apologetically. "Let's talk about something else."

"No. You might as well go on, now that you've begun."

"Well, it strikes me that whoever walked into —into it—would be jolly glad to get rid of the shoes he—or she—was wearing. No good trying to clean them. These scientific bobbies have microscopes and things. The only chance is to chuck them away somewhere—in a ditch or a river; anywhere a long way from here."

After a pause Celia said, "She still loved him."

"'All men kill the thing they love,'" quoted Brookes.

"But not all women, my dear. That's the difference."

"Well, I hope you're right. But . . ."

"But what?"

"I should like to know what the sandy-haired Scotsman is thinking."

"He's thinking he would like a cup of tea,"

said a pleasant voice behind them, and they turned to see Fleming within a few yards of them.

"Those who listen, Inspector," said Celia with an expression of mock severity, "never hear any good of themselves."

"And that's true of me, Miss Waldingham, as I heard my auburn hair described as sandy by Mr. Brookes."

"It wasn't fair, Mr. Fleming. It isn't sandy at all. Sugar?"

"Thank you. Yes, please, two lumps."

"Well, who did it?" asked Brookes lightly.

"Frankly, I don't know. Tell me, Miss Waldingham, supposing that someone gave you a sleeping draught last night . . ."

"What!" exclaimed Celia.

"How could it have been given? Did you drink anything before you went to bed?"

"Yes. I had a glass of orangeade."

"And you always have a glass of orangeade before turning in?"

"Yes."

"And I suppose it is put on a tray somewhere to wait till you want it?"

"Yes, in the drawing room, with the other drinks."

"That doesn't help much," said Fleming. "It

means that anyone might have got at it and slipped a little dope into it."

"It would have to be someone who knew the ways of the house," ventured Brookes.

"That's very true," assented the detective with a grave face, and Brookes was delighted at having suggested a point that had so obviously escaped the notice of the professional, and he began to wonder whether he should go further and give a hint of his suspicions.

"That's very true," said Fleming again in a thoughtful voice, and then he brightened up. "Come," he said, "let's talk of something more cheerful. I can't do very much more work for a bit."

"I thought you sleuths never rested for a moment until you'd got the criminal under lock and key," said Celia with a grave smile.

"Oh, dear me, no," answered Fleming. "The great thing about being an inspector is that all you have to do is to start the investigations on the right lines and then you put your feet on the mantelpiece and wait for reports from subordinates. These are grand cucumber sandwiches, Miss Waldingham."

"And what happens if you start the investigations on the wrong lines?" insisted Brookes.

"Oh, then I get sacked," was the cheerful answer. "Funny business about the stone rabbit," he went on.

"What about the stone rabbit?" asked Celia.

"Finding it up there by the house. Your gardener is quite indignant about it."

"Do you mean the one that was stolen from the gate post?"

"Yes. If you've finished tea, Miss Waldingham, perhaps we might stroll down and look at that gate."

The three struggled out of their deck chairs and strolled across the lawn towards the river. Immediately in front of the house for a distance of about forty yards the lawn actually ran down to the river edge, but at each end of the open strip there were thick bands of rhododendrons, which prevented anyone standing in front of the house from seeing more of the water than just the forty yards. A gravel path ran along the edge, dived between two rows of the shrubs, slipped through an old stone gateway, and ended at a small, modern boat house.

"There's the place," said Celia, and then she stopped on seeing three gardeners standing by the gate, deep in an excited conversation. One of the gate posts was crowned with a stone rabbit

—as far as Fleming could make out at a glance, identical with the one which he had found on the lawn; the other pedestal was vacant. As soon as the men saw the approach of the daughter of the house they relapsed into an embarrassed silence, and one of them, whom Fleming recognized as the gardener he had spoken to, stepped forward.

"The other one's gone, Miss Celia," he exclaimed in a voice of mingled excitement and indignation.

"But isn't that it there, Johnson?" asked Celia.

"No, miss. That's the one this gentleman found on the lawn. We've just put it up."

Fleming stepped forward and glanced at the rabbit.

"Yes, that's the one. You can see the marks of the chains. When did you miss the second one?"

"Half an hour ago, sir, when we brought the first one down to put him up again."

"Do any of you remember seeing it here yesterday?"

"Yes, sir," said one of the other men. "I saw it here yesterday."

"Then it must have gone during the night," exclaimed Brookes.

"So it must," agreed Fleming.

"But this is incredible," went on the young man. "Why should anyone want to steal these idiotic things and then go and bring one of them back?"

"Why, indeed?" Fleming was lost in thought. "There is something idiotic about the whole proceeding, and yet—I wonder. Where does that path go to?"

"To the boat house."

"Where did you bathe from this morning, Miss Waldingham?"

"From the punt."

"Do you mind going back to the lawn," said Fleming rather apologetically.

"Want to do some secret sleuthing? Come along, Celia," exclaimed Brookes, with an alacrity that would have made Fleming smile if he had not been thinking of other things. As soon as he was alone, the gardeners having discreetly retired, Fleming entered the boat house. It contained a punt and a canoe. The punt cushions had obviously been recently wetted, and there were the still damp traces of a small bare foot on the wooden platform on which the wielder of the punt pole takes his, or her, stand.

"I believe she really did bathe," muttered

Fleming, and then he suddenly exclaimed, "Hullo!" and stared hard at one of the cushions. The punt was upholstered, so to speak, in dark red, upon which the marks of water showed darker still. But one patch seemed to the detective to be of a different texture and depth of darkness. He knelt down and examined it carefully. The next moment he was running swiftly along the gravel path. Just before he reached the open lawn he dropped into an easy walk and returned to the house, calling out gaily as he passed the deck chairs. "It's all right, Miss Waldingham. I believe you really did bathe this morning."

In the house he at once sent for Maitland, took him aside, and whispered, "Drop everything and go down to the boat house. But, whatever you do, don't cross the lawn. Find a way round. There must be one. Test the punt for finger prints. There's a bloodstain on one of the cushions."

"Very good, sir. There are no prints on the stone figure, sir, and the men have come from the Yard, sir. Sergeant Anderson is in the library. The other two men are in the hall. They've sent Wilkins, sir, with one of the new cars, in case it might come in handy, and Mr. Marston wishes to speak to you, sir."

"If you can spare a moment," said a smooth voice, and Fleming turned to see the financier.

"Certainly. And what can I do for you?" he answered.

Marston laid a chubby hand on the detective's arm and led him into the deserted billiard room.

"I've been taking stock of our position," he said, as soon as they were alone. "Reinach's position, and I must tell you—in confidence, of course—that it's a little difficult, Mr. Inspector. We had undertaken certain government commitments—I can't specify details—which tended to be interconnected, so to speak, with this Baltanian affair. Very considerable interests were —indeed, still are—at stake."

"I can understand that, sir," said Fleming.

"My point in speaking to you, Inspector, is to know whether I could possibly return to London to-day—after dinner, for example. My colleagues on the board will naturally be——" He spread out a pair of pink hands, as if to indicate that the mental condition of his colleagues would be indescribable in words. "I don't press it," he added, "but it would enable me to save something from the disaster."

Fleming thought quickly. "I can always find you at Reinach's, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. The address is—it's in the telephone book," said the financier with a faint smile.

"Very well, sir," said Fleming. "You can go after dinner if nothing special has turned up by that time."

The financier bowed and left the room.

Fleming went into the library and found the thin, melancholy, round-shouldered handwriting expert reading an Italian treatise on *Occupational Influences on Calligraphy*.

"A small job, Anderson," he said, "but an important one."

He laid on the table the two slips of paper containing the fatal message, Celia Waldingham's letters from Mürren, and Lavender Arlington's scribble.

"I want to know, Anderson, whether there's any connection between any of these four handwritings. Let me have your opinion as soon as you can."

"I can let you have it while you wait, sir," answered the gloomy specialist, glancing at each in turn and fitting a small lens into his eye like a thick and stumpy eyeglass. "It's perfectly simple," he went on, after a few moments. "I never saw a simpler case."

He unscrewed his eyepiece, put it back in his

pocket, and looked round for his overcoat and bowler hat.

"This one—the strip with the initials at the end—was written left-handed, and therefore gives no indication of the writer. The other strip, without the initials, was written either by the writer of the letters in a very skilful attempt to disguise the writing, or else it was written by someone else who was attempting to copy the writing of the letter-writer. I could even elaborate the second alternative into a finer conclusion, and say that, if it is a forgery, it is the work of a man who had studied the writing very carefully indeed, and then, when he had to produce his forgery, he had to do it from memory, without a model before him."

"How do you get that?"

"There are one or two quite remarkably subtle likenesses, and then there are some almost silly mistakes. The man who made those likenesses had studied the writing. But he couldn't have had a model before him or he wouldn't have made those mistakes. It might be a family resemblance, of course."

Fleming strolled across to the desk and opened a large engagement book, on the cover of which was written "A. W."

"This is the writing of her nearest relative," he observed.

Sergeant Anderson glanced at it, once again extracted his little glass and scrutinized the writing.

"Yes," he said. "There, again, there's a family resemblance. It's quite distinct. I should say that either the man who wrote in this book wrote the strip of paper, or else that a third party, in imitating the letter-writing, caught the family resemblance, and so unconsciously imitated the book-writing. On the whole, the second is the more likely, and I am inclined to think that that is the answer—that the writer of the strip had practised imitating the letter-writing, and then had had to do it in a hurry. Is that all, sir?"

"That is all," answered Fleming thoughtfully. and the cadaverous sergeant tucked his Italian treatise under his arm and departed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ARRIVAL OF A FAST BOWLER

Dinner on the first evening after the tragedy was a peculiar affair. The men did not dress. Celia wore a black dress, with a sombre shawl thrown across her shoulders. Only Lavender Arlington was in full blaze of colours and jewels. Her entry into the subdued, pre-dinner, desultory talk of the drawing room made a distinct sensation. She wore a black frock, cut very low at the back, and a black and scarlet Spanish shawl. From her ears swung two long silver and opal earrings, and a great silver bracelet encircled one of her magnificent bare arms above the elbow. There was a jewelled comb in her hair, and large jewelled buckles on her scarlet shoes, which blazed against the black of her frock and her stockings.

Fleming, who was talking cricket with Leslie Brookes, could feel the sudden alteration in the atmosphere of the room. There was a perceptible stiffening of faces, a straying irrelevance in the talk, which meant that the talkers were not even

listening to themselves, and a slight arching, as it seemed to Fleming, of the moral eyebrows of the entire party. He could see that they all, with the possible exception of the impassive, unsurprisable Mr. Marston, felt that the blaze of splendour was in bad taste—perhaps even a worse crime, in the eyes of the Winchester and New College young man—than the murder itself.

Lavender Arlington had her moments of greatness, and she had risen to her pinnacle of fame by feeling what an audience is thinking and adapting herself accordingly. She stopped short a couple of yards inside the door and faced the party.

"I know what you're thinking," she cried, with a magnificent gesture of mingled pride and appeal, such as the Empress Maria Theresa might have made when she faced the House of Magnates in Budapest. "You wear black for people you don't mourn. I wear scarlet and gold and jewels for the man I do mourn. And why not? The real time for splendour is when a great man is dead. And the greatest of all is dead."

With a superb knowledge of just how much an average Englishman will stand of what he feels to be above his head, she walked across the room with the utmost calmness and helped herself to a cocktail.

The next moment the parlourmaid announced that dinner was ready, and everyone breathed again. During the meal it was the actress who dominated the conversation. She talked incessantly, and emptied her champagne glass incessantly. She rallied any member of the party who did not join in the talk, poured questions at them that compelled answers, and, in short, maintained an extravagant and, Fleming thought, a feverish level of animation and gaiety. Gradually her sparkle and the steadily circulating champagne combined to thaw the rather awkward coolness in which dinner had begun, and, by the time the savoury was reached, only Sir Arthur was reserved and quiet. The wildest and most audacious sallies of the actress failed to draw from him more than a courteous smile and a confused murmur by way of reply.

Fleming came in for more than his share of chaff and banter, but Lavender Arlington, supported towards the end of the meal by Celia and Leslie, found him unexpectedly good at repartee, and extremely up-to-date in his knowledge of slang and modern fashions and modes.

The only member of the party from whom it was impossible to extract a word was the dead man's secretary, Ellenberger, who sat and

scowled at his plate in a mixture of fury and misery. Even the inscrutable Marston joined in the talk, and suggested that he should finance a musical comedy for Lavender Arlington. Whether his suggestion was serious or not will never be known, for he added the unfortunate remark, "My firm will be looking for something new to finance now." Lavender Arlington blazed at him, "I wouldn't touch your foul money at the end of a barge pole."

There was an awkward silence, broken by the placid reply of Mr. Marston:

"That's what they all say at first," and then the talk was skilfully turned by Celia.

All the time Fleming could not help feeling that there was something rather horrible about the scene. The shadow or the spirit of the wild, brilliant, unscrupulous adventurer and patriot, who had gone to his last assignation not twenty-four hours before, seemed to be hanging over the room. There was something uncanny about the desperate gaiety of the woman who had loved him, who had been discarded by him, and who had followed him down from London—for what purpose? The Scotland Yard man felt that he had come upon the hot, passionate scene of a passionate romance. "Two personalities," he

thought, as he looked at the tiny red spot that had begun to glow through the paint and powder on each of Lavender Arlington's cheeks. The parlourmaid whispered in Sir Arthur's ear, and the host turned to the detective.

"Someone to see you, Fleming."

"Do you mind my leaving you?" the detective began, and was interrupted by loud cries of "Run along, Sherlock," "Hop it, Watson, my boy," "Now then, Lestrade," and other allusions to his professional rivals of fiction.

Sergeant Maitland was waiting for him outside in the hall.

"Reports, sir," he said, laconically.

"Well?"

The sergeant methodically turned over a few sheets of paper which he was carrying.

"Miss Arlington's car has been traced to three witnesses, farm labourers, but nothing suspicious has been found. Inquiries are proceeding. Inspector Williams has traced a foreigner who stayed one night in the Half Moon Inn, leaving on Saturday, the 20th inst."

"Yes."

"There's a man staying at the Crown that this foreigner visited and had a violent quarrel with."

"Oh? Who's that?"

"A man called P. P. St. John. He's still there."

"P. P. St. John? Has anybody seen him?"

"Not yet, sir. He was out all this afternoon, and hadn't got back when Inspector Williams called."

"Anything else?"

"Here's that man's list——"

"What man?"

"The secretary, sir. Ellenberger, I think the name is; he's made this list of all members of that secret society who speak English. All the ones he knows of, that's to say." Sergeant Maitland was very precise and slow in making verbal reports. He greatly preferred sitting down and writing them out.

"Well? Anything else?" said his superior a little impatiently.

"Fingerprints in the punt, sir. Three sets. Quite distinct. A woman's on the sides of the punt and on the punt pole. Two different sets, both men's, on the paddles. The analysis of the orangeade glass has come back from the chemist. It contained nothing but orangeade. And one thing more, sir. There's that German detective arrived. He's in the billiard room."

"Von Hoffmann?" shouted the Inspector. "Idiot and ass! Why didn't you say so before?"

He ran across the hall, and the next moment was shaking hands warmly with the redoubtable Walther von Hoffmann, head of the Berlin detective force.

"My dear fellow," he exclaimed, while the other boomed greetings at him. Von Hoffmann was a huge, square man, with massive shoulders and long legs. His head was also huge and square, his hair was shaved in the Prussian fashion, and his face was immense and red. He looked, indeed, at first sight, to be an exceptionally large specimen of a very ordinary Teutonic type. But a pair of alert, twinkling, light-blue eyes redeemed his appearance, and at a second glance he seemed to be that rare phenomenon, a regular, full-blown Prussian official with an acute sense of humour. Which, indeed, he was. His mother had been a Frenchwoman from Lorraine, and from her he had inherited his sensitiveness, his swift understanding of other people's troubles and sorrows, and also, very often, their motives when committing crimes, and also his capacity to make occasionally successful guesses. He had learned his excellent, if a little painstaking, English during three of the early years of the Twentieth Century at Brasenose College, Oxford, where he took a degree in history, made a name for himself as a

fearsome and fast Rugby forward, and mastered the intricacies of cricket to the extent of becoming an incredibly fast and erratic round-arm bowler, the terror of the village teams against whom he frequently played.

"Come into the library," said Fleming, and the two friends installed themselves in comfortable chairs and lit a couple of huge German cigars.

"Now, my friend, explain why you wanted me so urgently down here," said Von Hoffmann.

"I am interested," answered Fleming, "in a man of about fifty, short, stout, dark eyes, probably German or Germanic, as an assassin somewhere about the plus three mark."

"By the way," broke in Von Hoffmann eagerly, "talking of plus three, I have got my handicap down from seven to five, all because of a tip I got from the great Mr. Palliss, out at Wannsee. You see, my left elbow . . ."

"Yes. Quite so," cut in Fleming drily, "an assassin, as I was saying, somewhere about the plus three mark, who went recently, I have every reason to believe, to Frankfort."

"Frankfort!" The German had forgotten all about golf. "Go on."

"That's all the description there is. No one took much notice of him."

"Well," said the German, "it sounds like my man, though I must confess that our descriptions of him are about as sketchy as yours."

"Who is your man?"

"Oh, he's got fifty names. Von Winckel is believed to be his real one. He's the top-notch, number one, crackerjack of crime in Germany to-day. I've never seen him, to my knowledge. Very few people have. He's a professional assassin by inclination and a general crook by trade. I want him for a diamond robbery in Stettin. If I can get him jailed for that, I may be able to fix one of his murders on him. Particularly a recent job in Charlottenburg."

"Well, I rather think he's been here."

"Tell me about it."

"It's a long story, old chap. Do you mind if I begin right at the beginning?"

"I know of no better place to begin," said the Berliner.

CHAPTER IX

A SON OF LIBERTY

THE story took over an hour in the telling. Fleming told it slowly, remembering every little detail of the sequence of events as they had occurred, not in the actual committing of the crime, but in his own experience since he had arrived at Westbrook.

Von Hoffmann's second cigar was half finished before the story finally came to an end with the discovery of the fingerprints in the punt, the last event before his own arrival. It was entirely finished, and a third was being extracted from his cigar case, before he made his first comment.

"There are too many motives for my liking," he said in his deep voice. "But with a man like Harden that is inevitable. Most of this world was divided into people who adored him and people who hated him. I met him once, unofficially, and liked him. He was a splendid-looking chap, with a carefully cultivated air of being like Byron, only more practical. He liked people to

think of him, not only as a preacher of revolutions, but as a leader of them. I also met him once officially, and didn't like him at all."

"What happened?"

"I had orders to deport him. He was in the middle of a big swindle to raise funds for one or other of his escapades and at the same time having an affair with the wife of a well-known Reichstag deputy. I had to tell him to go. He was livid with rage, and went for me. It must have been like a head-on charge of two elephants," the detective laughed reminiscently. "But you know, Fleming, he wouldn't fight fair. First tried kicking—kicking, Fleming! And then whipped out a knuckleduster. I could have run him in—isn't that right, 'run him in'?—for assault, but instead I chucked him over the frontier.

"A remarkable man, but a damnably ugly customer," he added, and then, "There'll be a good deal of weeping—feminine weeping—in Europe to-morrow."

"And financial weeping in London to-day," observed Fleming.

"True. Very true. And now let's discuss the case," said the German briskly.

"No. You discuss it," said Fleming. "I'll listen. I want your opinion."

"Well," began Von Hoffmann slowly, "my first opinion is that there are far too many things we can't explain."

"Far too many," was the dry response.

"What I mean is, suppose my pal Von Winckel did it, or one of the Sons of Liberty—*mein Gott!* what a name!—it would be more or less a clean-cut affair. An entry into the house, a quick stab, and a quick get-away. A Son of Liberty might have bungled it, of course—almost certainly would have—but not to the extent of leaving a stone rabbit about done up in chains and walking off with another one under his arm. No. It seems to me that we've got one big coincidence to face. and the more I think about it the less big it seems to me."

"What is the coincidence?"

"That two entirely separate conspiracies were on foot during the same night. There was the conspiracy centring round Harden's passion for this Miss Waldingham, and there was the conspiracy against Harden's life."

"I can imagine circumstances," said Fleming, "in which the second conspiracy would be the direct result of the first."

"That's perfectly true. But my objection to that would be that both conspiracies would be

inside the house. Unless, of course, we have to deal with a lover of Miss Waldingham's who came in from outside and attacked Harden. Somehow, that seems unlikely. It seems to me that there was one set of conspirators outside who monkeyed about with the rabbit, came in by the gun-room window and killed Harden, and another set inside who sent Harden the bogus messages——"

"Why two? And were they bogus?"

"We can come to that later. The point is that they must surely have been the work of an inside party. So must the doping."

"If there was dope used."

"True. If there was dope used. The orangeade glass, by the way, what happened to it?"

"It contained only orangeade."

"That cuts both ways. An inside doper could have washed out the glass. Now, look here, Fleming; there were apparently three people, besides Harden himself, actively interested in Harden's love affairs. There was this actress, the young man, and the girl herself. It's rather an amazing coincidence that on the morning after this affair two of them should have acted in an unusual way, while the third—well, the third was left in charge of the body for at least five minutes,

and had time, say, to slip little notes into dressing gown pockets if he'd wanted to."

"That's an idea, certainly."

"It may not be true for a moment, but it's a possibility. And, anyway, we've got to account for these duplicate notes in different handwriting."

"Your idea boils down to this, then," said Fleming, "that a murder conspiracy from outside overlapped an amorous conspiracy, or, rather, a conspiracy to thwart an amorous intrigue, that was going on inside."

"It's a possibility," said Von Hoffmann. "You may say it's a monstrous coincidence. But consider. The whole essence of the week-end was that Marston and Harden should meet and talk finance. Harden arrived on the Thursday. Marston not till the Saturday morning. Is that right?"

"Quite right."

"Now, the party was going to split up on the Monday morning—to-day, in fact. Very well. Suppose the murderer wants to prevent the financial deal from going through, he won't actually kill Harden until he's certain that Harden and Marston have met. Otherwise he would be taking an unnecessary risk. Harden and Marston might not be doing business at all. It might just be

a rumour. Not worth risking one's neck until one is certain, eh?"

"That's true enough."

"The murderer follows Harden down here and waits. On Saturday, Marston arrives. If the man knows your English week-end, he must strike on Saturday or Sunday. He strikes on Sunday. Harden has worked hard at his intrigue since Thursday. He is about to triumph, or thinks he is—according to who really sent him that message —on the last night before he goes once more to save his country, forlorn hope, may never come back, devoted for ever, die with your name on my lips—you know the sort of thing, Fleming. You must have done it scores of times yourself, you old crook."

"Nothing of the kind," protested the Scottish detective indignantly.

"But you see what I mean. It isn't really such a big coincidence to suppose that last night was the culminating crisis in both affairs."

"Assuming that there were two affairs."

"Of course. Now, I suggest that we do assume two affairs, and concentrate for the moment upon the outside one. You say that the blood upon the cushion of the punt was at least twenty-four hours old; that a stone weight has disappeared;

that another stone weight was found on the lawn, apparently in readiness for—for something to be attached to it."

"Yes. Brought a hundred yards from the river, instead of being left at the river for the—for the something to be brought to it."

"Never mind that. We shall find a reason for that later on. In the meantime, everything seems to point to something in the river. But what is it? We can only find out by dragging."

"We'll start first thing to-morrow morning."

"Then there's my Mr. von Winckel. Why did he come up to the house next morning if he killed Harden in the night?"

"If it comes to that, why did he come up at all, whether he killed him or not?"

"And then there's this foreigner at the Half Moon who came and quarrelled with P. P. St. John and then vanished. Perhaps he's at the bottom of the river."

"Look here," said Fleming. "It's only a quarter to ten. Let's stroll down to the Crown and see this St. John fellow. He might be able to help us."

"When is your thrice-accursed closing time in this district?" asked Von Hoffmann, heaving himself to his feet.

"Ten o'clock. We've just got time if we hurry," answered Fleming with a grin.

The two friends walked rapidly down to the inn, arriving a few minutes before the fatal hour. After the Scottish detective had consumed a whisky-and-soda and the German three pints of beer—two operations that took about the same length of time—the landlord was asked if Mr. St. John was in.

"He is, gentlemen; the first night he's been in for some time."

The detectives glanced at each other.

"He's upstairs now. First on the left at the top of the stairs. There's a light on the landing."

Fleming led the way up and knocked at the door. There was a loud shout of "Come in," and they entered.

Mr. P. P. St. John was a man of about thirty-five, of middle size, thin, brown-complexioned, with an alert brown eye and small black moustache. He was neatly dressed and his hair was neatly brushed. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, playing patience on a small table in front of him; a bottle of whisky, two-thirds full, a syphon, and a glass lay beside the cards. He looked at the intruders with a pleasant but, Fleming thought, slightly ironical smile.

"Excuse me," said Fleming politely. "I am sorry to intrude, but it is a matter of some urgency."

St. John glanced at him, and then his eyes rested on the massive figure of Von Hoffmann which was slightly in the background.

"Dear me," he observed, "if it isn't Walther. Dear old Walther."

Von Hoffmann took a step forward and stared at him. "Who are you?" he asked finally.

"My name is St. John. I have seen you often in Berlin; very nearly once too often." He turned his head towards Fleming, and said civilly, "You're from the Yard, of course"; and, without waiting for an answer, he picked up a chair and struck the floor three resounding blows, which made the whole house tremble, the windows rattle, and the texts on the walls of the bedroom almost start out of their gilded frames.

"Sit down," he went on, waving a hand round the room, "and if Walther breaks a chair it can go on my bill."

There was a knock at the door, and the landlord's head came round the corner rather timidly.

"Do you want something, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, by thunder. Whisky or beer, Walther? And you, sir? Landlord, another bottle of whisky,

half a dozen syphons, two glasses, and a dozen quart bottles of beer."

"A dozen quarts, sir?" asked the astounded landlord.

"A dozen quarts," shouted St. John. "Look at him"—he pointed at Von Hoffmann with the ace of spades. "Look at him. What use are pints to a man of that size?"

The scared proprietor gave a hasty glance at the German and then scurried from the room.

"And now, gentlemen, what can I do for you?"

Fleming could see, even in the indifferent light of the oil lamp, that the man had discarded his jovial mask and was thoroughly on his guard. He looked alert, capable, and not only accustomed to taking care of himself, but also accustomed to meeting police officers in the execution of their duty.

"You seem to know more about us—by the way, my name is Fleming—than we do about you."

"Why not? Private citizen—public officials." He bowed with mock solemnity.

"We came about a foreigner who is said to have come here on or about the nineteenth, to have quarrelled with you, and then gone away on the twentieth."

"Quite right. That's dear old Vladimir Kauskas. He's gone."

"Kauskas?" said Von Hoffmann. "That's a Baltanian name."

"My dear Sherlock Hoffmann, how do you do it?"

Fleming pulled Ellenberger's list of English-speaking Sons of Liberty out of his pocket. The fourth name on it was Vladimir Kauskas. He was just folding it up again when his eye caught the last name but one. It was Peter P. St. John.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, and passed the paper across to Von Hoffmann.

"Please excuse me while you're reading," observed St. John ironically, but the sarcasm was lost on the detectives.

"So you're a Son of Liberty," shot out the German suddenly.

St. John did not even blink. "Rather," he assented. "Are you?"

"Then I take it that your second name is Petrovich, or something like that?"

"Petrovich it is. My mother was a Baltanian, and I was called after her father."

He rolled up his sleeve with a theatrical air, and announced:

"Here is the sign of our great brotherhood—

or sonship, I suppose it should be called." On his upper arm was tattooed a small red circle, with a blue dot in the centre.

"The red dawn of liberty," he explained affably, "surrounding the world. Awful rot, isn't it?"

"What was Kauskas doing over here?" demanded Fleming.

"He had come to take the waters at Harrogate. Owing to his comparative ignorance of English, and mistaking Paddington for King's Cross, he arrived instead at Pangbourne."

Fleming was undisturbed by this nonsense, and went on:

"What are you doing here?"

"I am here for my health." There was a certain grimness about this reply which was quite different from the lightness of his previous talk.

Von Hoffmann looked at him keenly, but when he spoke it was to Fleming.

"These two came over from the Sons of Liberty to—let us say—argue with Harden. On the night of the nineteenth they quarrelled about something—these secret society chaps quarrel like cats—and on the twentieth the other chap went away in disgust, leaving St. John to do the dirty work."

"The point is," said Fleming, "did he do it?"

"And the answer," put in St. John calmly, "is that he did not."

"Where were you on Saturday night? The landlord says you haven't been at home for several nights."

"I was dancing at the Embassy Club in Bond Street until two in the morning—it was one of their late nights—and from two until half-past five at the Twopenny-halfpenny Club in Long Acre. By the way, Fleming, do you know the Twopenny-halfpenny Club? It's so called because twopence halfpenny was all it had left after that ex-sergeant of yours had been along. All right, don't scowl at me. Anyway, I was there till half-past five. At six a.m., sir and captain, I was entering my club in St. James's Street, and at ten-twenty-four a.m., yesterday I descended from the Great Western's commodious and comfortable train at Pangbourne."

"And last night?"

"Last night being Sunday, I varied my programme. I went to London and dined at the club. I then went to a cinema with three fellow members whose names and addresses I will supply. After the cinema I played bridge at the club

until two a.m. At two-thirty a.m. I had coffee at the stall in Hyde Park Corner. At three-fifteen I had coffee at the stall in Battersea Park. At four-ten I had Bovril at the stall near Knightsbridge barracks, and once again at six a.m. I was knocking at the door of my club. Now then, dear Sherlock, break the alibi if you can. Signed, yours truly, Moriarty, Professor."

"Very complete; very complete indeed," murmured Fleming. "All the coffee-stall men would recognize you, I suppose? You told them stories and stood them drinks out of a flask?"

"A bottle," corrected St. John affably.

"A bottle, of course, and generally made certain that they would know you again."

"Exactly."

"In other words, you knew a murder was coming, and you were going to be well out of it. That makes you an accessory before the fact, you know."

"You've got to prove it, my lad."

"Yes," agreed Fleming. "And that may be difficult. A description of Kauskas seems to be the next thing."

St. John grinned. "I've got one ready." He handed over a slip of paper, adding, "I thought you'd want that."

"Was Kauskas staying here?" put in Von Hoffmann.

"Yes. On the nineteenth. He didn't come back on the twentieth."

"Where was he on the twentieth, twenty-first, and twenty-second?"

"I've no idea. All I know is that I didn't see him."

"Did you see a small, stout, German-looking man with glasses——?"

"You mean Piip?" St. John laughed heartily. "Poor little Piip!"

"Why, what about him?"

"I had a drink with him yesterday before I went to London. Several, in fact. I never knew a man who had such bad luck."

"What sort of luck?"

"Well, he was pretending to be the correspondent of a Baltanian paper, and the first person he met down here was me, and I'm bilingual in England and Balt. He's no more Baltanian than you are."

"Did you see any more of him?"

"No. He'd gone by the time I came back."

"Would you be surprised to hear that he was a well-known assassin?"

"Not in the least. I had my own suspicions of that yesterday evening."

The two detectives leant forward eagerly, and Fleming said:

"What aroused your suspicions?"

"It was when we were standing each other drinks. You see, I stood him a double whisky and had one myself. By the way, your glass is empty, Fleming. Then he stood a round and only had a single himself. Then it was my turn, and he had a double. It happened about six times." He leant back and surveyed his two listeners.

"Well?" said Von Hoffmann, pulling another quart bottle out of the wooden box which the landlord had brought up.

"Well, only a pretty low sort of crook would do a thing like that."

"Do you mean to say," exclaimed the indignant Fleming, "that that's what you meant when you said you had suspicions of his being a murderer?"

"Good Lord, isn't that enough?" retorted St. John with some warmth. "A man who would do a thing like that is capable of doing anything."

Fleming got up. "Look here, Mr. St. John, I can't waste any more time over stuff of this sort."

"Have another drink and tell me all about Sergeant Goddard," returned the undaunted St. John.

"But I've only got two things to say to you," pursued Fleming. "The first is that I must ask you not to leave the neighbourhood until I say you can, and the second is that you may find yourself arrested on a charge of being an accessory if you don't take care."

St. John affected to consider this warning carefully, and then he said, perfectly seriously, "Look here, Fleming, I'll make a bargain with you."

"Let's hear it."

"I'll tell you all I know—and I warn you it's not very much, but it may help you—on one condition."

"And what is your condition?"

"That you arrest me as the murderer."

"I understand," said Von Hoffmann. "You want your name brought prominently before the headquarters of your precious Sons? Then they'll think you've done your bit. Is that it?"

Peter St. John stooped over the wooden crate and pulled out two quart bottles of beer.

"Would you sooner have this cigar or this nice bag of nuts?" he said politely.

"Come on, Hoffmann," said Fleming impatiently, making for the door; and then he said over his shoulder: "You'll find me at Westbrook House if you've anything more you want to tell me."

"Anything more I want to tell you? Well," said the irrepressible St. John slowly, "I've got a damned good tip for the Leger . . ."

CHAPTER X

THE SECOND STONE RABBIT

The morning after the discovery of the body of Ferdinand Harden dawned bright and sunny and windless, and at an early hour the local police, under the taciturn and competent supervision of Sergeant Maitland, began to drag the river opposite Westbrook House, and a quarter of a mile above and below it. Fleming had come to the conclusion that, even if the second stone rabbit had been dumped from the boat, it was unlikely that the dumpers would have ventured to go very far from Westbrook, for fear of being seen.

The sergeant's only remark on hearing his instructions on the previous evening had been, "What am I to expect to find, sir?"

"The rabbit, of course," Fleming had answered, "and a pair of shoes or boots firmly attached to it."

And so the police dragged the river. They began at ten past five, and at eight minutes to seven found the rabbit. But it had more than a pair

of shoes attached to it. It had the body of a fully grown man.

Fleming was on the scene at seven exactly, and Von Hoffmann was only three minutes later. The local doctor arrived at a quarter past in the police car, and at about twenty past the detectives began their investigation. The doctor reported that the man had been dead for at least two days, and that he had died of the most frightful injuries to his head. He had received a blow with a weapon between the eyes which had completely caved in the forehead, eyes, and bridge of the nose. Another had smashed in the teeth and mouth.

"They must have been tremendous blows," the doctor concluded. "A metal bar or a big wooden mallet might have been used. Nothing small or light would have done it."

"Not a knuckleduster on the fist of an immensely powerful man?"

"It might conceivably, but I doubt it. A Dempsey or a Tunney, perhaps. Certainly no ordinary man."

The body was carried up to the house and laid on a sofa in the billiard room, and then the detectives got to work. Just before they began their examination Von Hoffmann said:

"I'll lay you six to four that it's Kauskas. Is it a bet?"

"Certainly not," said Fleming warmly. "I was just going to offer you three to one."

At the end of twenty minutes the examination was complete. The body was that of a middle-sized man of uncertain age, light-brown hair, and medium build. He wore a dark suit, made by the firm of Wilkinson & Goat, Savile Row; shirt and collar made by Josephs of Jermyn Street; and button boots, with what had once been pearl-gray tops, bearing the name of Hawker, South Molton Street. The pockets contained a silver cigarette case, a silver match box, a fountain pen, a silk handkerchief, a gold watch and chain, and a couple of letters which had been soaked to a pulp by the water. On the upper part of the left arm was tattooed a red circle containing a blue dot.

"There we are," said Fleming. "That's our friend."

"Yes," agreed his large German colleague. "And it certainly carries us a little nearer. By the way," he added, "I am getting rather more interested in your case than I am in my own. I'm afraid I'm butting in."

"Don't be an ass," said Fleming with a smile.

"Well, in that case," answered Von Hoffmann, "I'll stay on for a bit, if you don't mind. Scotland Yard is looking for Von Winckel, and I can't really do very much until they find him. Now, as to this Kauskas."

"Yes," said Fleming thoughtfully. "I begin to understand a little the scene on the night of the nineteenth in the Crown Inn. Kauskas and St. John came over here . . ."

"St. John first and Kauskas afterwards, I should think."

"Yes. St. John first, with instructions to kill Harden. Being a wise man, he hesitated about doing it on English soil. Kauskas followed, reproached him with his inactivity. They quarrelled, and finally Kauskas set out alone to kill Harden. He found he'd bitten off more than he could chew, and Harden killed him, tied him to the rabbit, and chucked him overboard."

"Yes," said Von Hoffmann slowly. "That all sounds reasonable. But it doesn't account for the second rabbit, nor for who killed Harden."

"The second rabbit is certainly a difficulty. If we could account for it, all the peculiar incidents outside would be settled, and that would leave the murder of Harden as the work of the inside group."

"What about my Mr. von Winckel?"

"I don't believe he had anything to do with it."

The German hopped up onto the billiard table with amazing lightness for such a bulky man and lit a cigar.

"If we rule out Von Winckel," he rumbled, half to himself, "we are constructing a most extraordinary coincidence. A particularly effective murder is committed; it is a murder which means several million pounds to a group of Frankfort gentlemen. The most brilliant and skilful criminal in all Germany is seen in Frankfort. On the morning of the murder he appears at the door of the house in which it was committed, and we are going to say that he had nothing to do with it. No. Oh, no. Oh, dear, no. It won't do, Fleming. It won't do at all."

"But, my dear chap, you're asking me to believe a much more difficult sequence of events. You're asking me to believe that this star turn of yours entered the house, killed Harden with seven violent stabs in the back, went back to the Crown, and came up here next morning to inquire whether he could see the body."

"I can understand his coming back again. That is just like Von Winckel, all cheek and

audacity. But that he required seven stabs—that is unthinkable. That is absurd. With seven stabs he would have killed seven men, not one."

"Then you are certain he didn't do the murder, and we are certain he came up to the house afterwards. What do you make of that? What sort of bluff was he putting up?"

"Bluff!" roared Von Hoffmann in a voice of thunder. "Bluff! Of course. What a blind devil I am. Of course, it was all part of a big and brilliant bluff."

"I don't see how he was bluffing us," began Fleming, but the German interrupted with another shout.

"Us! He wasn't bluffing us. He was laying the foundations for bluffing his employers in Frankfort. Listen. He came on Sunday to the Crown. He was going to kill Harden, perhaps on the Monday, perhaps later. Anyway, there he was. On Monday morning in rushes the hysterical maid with the news. Winckel has to think quick. Someone has been before him. Will the Frankforters pay up? Yes, if he can get back quickly with a circumstantial tale. He goes up as fast as he can to have a look at the scene of the murder; perhaps if he's quick he might even get a look at the body. He wants a little local colour. He

gets a general impression of the grounds and house, and off he goes to Frankfort to claim his pay for a job someone else did. How about that?"

"That certainly would account for him," agreed Fleming. The more he considered Von Hoffmann's theory the more he liked it. It was natural and simple, and covered all the facts.

"That leaves the second rabbit and the inside intrigue," he said.

"The inside intrigue," murmured the German. "An expert assassin wouldn't stab a man seven times. What about a jealous woman?"

Fleming cocked an eye at him. "Yes, or a jealous man."

"Or a jealous man. Or even a girl whose room had been entered by force."

There was a long silence, during which neither detective liked to meet the other's eye.

At last Fleming said, "Well, we'd better get St. Jonn up to identify this"—he jerked an elbow at the body on the couch—"and put Maitland on to seeing if he can get any sense out of these sodden letters."

"I think I'll wander round the house, get some breakfast, and see if I can pick up any stray conversation with the inmates."

"'Inmates' isn't the right word," said Fleming.

"You wait till you talk German half as well as I talk English," was the swift retort.

They walked out into the hall, and the first person they met was Peter St. John, standing with a suitcase in each hand and a broad grin on his face.

"Bung O, fellow lodgers," he exclaimed. "What about a touch of breakfast, eh?"

At that moment the parlourmaid came hastening downstairs and addressed the newcomer.

"Miss Celia says, sir, would you mind beginning breakfast, and she'll be down in about half an hour. I'll send your suitcases up to your room, sir. This way to the dining room, sir."

When the two detectives and the young man were seated at the breakfast table and the maid had gone out, Fleming could no longer contain himself, and exclaimed, "What the devil are you doing here?"

Peter St. John winked deliberately, and said: "I'm an invited guest, which is a dashed sight more than you are, Sexton Blake."

Von Hoffmann laughed so heartily at this retort that Fleming began to get angry.

"Didn't I tell you not to leave the Crown . . ."

"Not to leave the neighbourhood," interposed St. John blandly. "Them was your very words.

And in any case, my lad, don't you know the law better than that? You can arrest and detain, but you can't go up to a perfectly innocent, law-abiding, God-fearing citizen and say, 'Don't leave the Crown till I give you leave.' I'll write to *John Bull* about you if you don't take care." And he grinned broadly and derisively, and helped himself to a third sausage.

The early start of the detectives had resulted in their being first at breakfast, and it was not until nearly twenty minutes had elapsed that the next person came into the dining room. During these twenty minutes the only piece of information which St. John had condescendingly offered was that he had all along had an invitation to stay at Westbrook for the week-end, but had thought it prudent not to accept it.

"Can't be too careful, Fleming, old fish," he had remarked airily, "not to be mixed up in low company. I'm sailing pretty near the wind as it is, breakfasting with you two." He had discovered that Fleming's matter-of-fact Aberdonian common sense objected strongly to being chaffed when he was on duty. Von Hoffmann's obvious delight added zest to the pastime.

Peter St. John, however, could be serious on

occasion, and it was with grave and almost funereal demeanour that he approached the body on the billiard-room couch. Fleming lifted the sheet that had been laid over it, watching St. John's face keenly as he did so. The young man went a little pale under his tan, and his hand trembled for a moment. Then, with a faint shiver, he stepped nearer and scrutinized the corpse.

"Well," he said at last, "it's Kauskas, all right. But I wouldn't swear to it in a law court. Not with his head bashed in like that. Mind you, I'm sure it's him. But I would only swear that it was one of us, a Son of Liberty. The mark is unmistakable."

"Do you recognize any of these?" asked Fleming, pointing to the little pile that he had taken from the dead man's pockets.

St. John looked them over and shook his head.

"No. But there's no reason why I should. I only saw him for a couple of hours."

"Didn't he smoke while you were with him?"

"Yes. But I didn't notice his case. Hullo," he added in a changed voice.

"What's the matter?"

"Kauskas certainly wasn't wearing those boots when he came to see me. That I will swear to.

No one could possibly miss those foul things with gray tops and buttons."

Both detectives pricked up their ears, and Fleming said:

"What sort of boots was he wearing?"

"I don't know. I didn't notice. Not those, anyway."

"And did he bring any lugggage with him?"

"No. He only came down for the day."

The door of the billiard room opened at that moment, and Sir Arthur Waldingham strolled in casually. He came to a sudden stop as he saw the group of men, and then his eyes fell upon the object on the couch. Fleming had just had time to twitch the sheet more or less back into place, but the outline of the body was sufficiently obvious under the covering. The baronet went pale, and he half stammered:

"Good God! What's that?"

Fleming bit his lip, and cursed himself for not having taken the elementary precaution of locking the door. But the next instant he reflected that St. John would be almost certain to give the story away, anyhow, and he had just made up his mind to take the baronet into his confidence when Sir Arthur suddenly went paler than ever and attempted to say something.

Only unintelligible sounds issued from his mouth, and then he managed to say hoarsely: "The boots. Who is it? Who is it?" and he pointed with a trembling hand and arm to the pearl-topped boots which stuck out from the end of the sheet.

"Do you recognize the boots?" said Fleming, but Sir Arthur only answered:

"Who is it? Tell me who it is."

"It's a Baltanian named Vladimir Kauskas," struck in Von Hoffmann from the background.

Sir Arthur swept his hand across his eyes, and then half staggered to a chair.

"Forgive me," he said, with a weak and apologetic smile. "I thought for a ghastly moment that it was a friend of mine—my best friend, in fact. It gave me a bit of a shock. I'm quite all right now. Poor fellow. I knew a Kauskas years ago in Baltania; perhaps a relation. Poor fellow. How did he die? Was it—was it an accident?"

"No, Sir Arthur," answered Fleming gravely. "It was not."

"I feared it. I feared it," muttered the baronet. "There's a curse on this house."

Von Hoffmann struck in again. "It's odd about the boots. Who was your friend's tailor, do you happen to know, Sir Arthur?"

"Yes, I do. The same as mine. Wilkinson & Goat, in Savile Row."

St. John broke in excitedly. "That reminds me," he cried. "I don't know why I didn't think of it before. That's not the suit Kauskas was wearing. He had on a foreign one, a brown one—a damnable thing with only one button in front."

Sir Arthur's eyes wandered from man to man and then lighted on the heap of personal effects. He jumped up and walked across to the table on which they lay. "These are Florian's all right," he said. "I gave him the cigarette case myself many years ago. And that's his pencil." He turned and faced the detectives. "What does this mean, gentlemen? I think you ought to tell me."

"First," said Fleming. "Florian is Mr. Root, I take it? The gentleman who left Westbrook on Saturday and hasn't come back?"

"Yes. He's an erratic fellow. Often does things like that."

"Is he sufficiently erratic to change clothes with a total stranger?"

"He may not have been a stranger. Florian is Vice-Chairman of our Anglo-Baltanian Society."

"Ah!" said Von Hoffmann, in a tone that was full of meaning. "So Mr. Root was also interested in Baltania? He might have equipped a fugitive

with a suit of clothes, mightn't he, if the fugitive happened to be a friend?"

"And then cleared out himself?" said Fleming. "It's an idea, certainly."

Sir Arthur began to defend the absent Mr. Root, but Fleming cut him short rather ruthlessly with the words:

"Come, Sir Arthur, it does need some explaining, doesn't it? Your friend's clothes are found on a dead man. How did they get there? Had your friend a valet?"

"No."

"Then Kauskas either stole them or Mr. Root gave them to him."

Sir Arthur tried a new line. "Look here, Inspector, I think I all know the Baltanians that Root knows. He hasn't been there for years, and he doesn't go about much. Let me look at this poor fellow. If I can't recognize his face . . ."

"You certainly won't recognize his face," said Fleming grimly.

"Then how do you know it's this other man?" faltered the baronet.

"By the mark on his arm. The circle and the dot."

"But, my God!" shrieked Sir Arthur, "Florian had that mark on his arm."

CHAPTER XI

THE INDIGNANT UNDERSTUDY

It was some time before Sir Arthur recovered from the shock of having to try to identify the body. All he had been able to say was that it was the body of Florian Root without any doubt. He repeated this over and over again, and did not seem to hear the questions with which Fleming attempted to amplify the identification. Finally, the detectives gave it up for the time, and Sir Arthur tottered feebly to his room to lie down.

St. John was the first to break the silence after the baronet had gone out.

"I say, boys," he observed, "this rather complicates your little job, doesn't it? I mean, which of them killed who, and why? And also when?"

Getting no answer, he went on ruminatively: "Odd thing that this Root fellow should have been a Son of jolly old Liberty too. His must have been a pre-war nativity, so to speak. Before my time, anyway."

Von Hoffmann got up and went to the door. "I think I'll do a little turn round the house,

Fleming," he said, "and see what I can see."

"All right. I'll give a description of Kauskas to Scotland Yard and get the ports watched. Though if the man's still alive he'll probably have got away by now. As for you, Mr. St. John, I suppose it's quite hopeless to expect you to hold your tongue."

"Oh, quite. The only way to stop me talking is to arrest me for killing Harden and put me in a cosy little cell by myself somewhere."

Von Hoffmann strolled out on to the lawn, and found Leslie Brookes and Celia Waldingham walking up and down deep in conversation.

"Good-morning," he called out cheerfully, ignoring the scowl on Brookes's face. "I see there's a new visitor arrived."

"Oh, yes, Mr. St. John," exclaimed Celia. "How rude of me! I'd forgotten all about him." She was about to run indoors when the German stopped her by saying, "Don't go in, Miss Waldingham. St. John's all right. He's having a lovely time. Don't disturb him."

"Why, what's he doing?"

"He's ragging Fleming and making him very angry. By the way, who is Mr. St. John?"

"He's got something to do with father's society. He's a member of it, and he often does

interpreting when anyone comes over who can't speak English. He's bilingual, you know."

"Did you invite him down?"

"He invited himself. Or, rather, he put it in such a way that I had to ask him, and then he never turned up. Rather funny. He was asked for Friday, and here he is, arriving on Tuesday. It's really rather awkward."

"He's an awful outsider, anyway," said Brookes. "Half foreign, you know."

"And I'm wholly foreign," murmured Von Hoffmann, and Leslie Brookes had the grace to blush and laugh sheepishly.

"Leslie," said Celia severely, "if you can't behave yourself you'll have to go and stand in the corner."

"I will, if you'll come with me," retorted Brookes, recovering his good spirits; and then he turned to the detective.

"You know, Mr. Hoffmann, I've seen you before somewhere."

"Oh, Leslie," cried Celia, "it's all going to come out at last. You did get run in as a drunk and disorderly when you went to Berlin. Do tell me, Inspector, was he very drunk?"

"I wasn't," protested Brookes. "I was the soberest man in the party."

"You must have been pretty bad," replied Celia swiftly, "if they had to get the chief of police to arrest you."

"What party was this?" put in Von Hoffmann.

"It was a Rugger team that went over last year to play against Berlin University."

"Ah! A team called the New College Wasps?"

"That's right," cried Brookes. "I was playing scrum-half. Did you see the match?"

"I refereed it," replied Von Hoffmann, with a more than usually bright twinkle in his blue eyes, "and I remember that the English scrum-half was incessantly off-side."

"That's where I saw you!" exclaimed Brookes. "You pulled me up about twenty times for off-side."

"Oh, Leslie, you horrid little cheat!" said Celia reproachfully.

"Cheating! Nonsense! It's all part of the game, except when the referee sees you, and then it's no fun at all. Were you at the dinner at the Adlon afterwards?"

"I was. And it was only by producing my official card that I saved you all from being arrested for playing Rugger with a champagne bottle in the big dining room afterwards. I was nearly arrested myself."

"There!" said Celia. "I always knew there was something about that visit to Berlin."

"By the by," said Von Hoffmann casually, concealing his delight at having established a bond of contact with the young couple. "By the by, tell me about Mr. Root, Miss Waldingham." The transition in conversation from football to business was so skilfully done that neither Celia nor Leslie saw anything incongruous in the question.

"Uncle Florian? Has he come back? I should like to see him."

"I don't know if he's back," was the grimly truthful answer, and Celia went on.

"He's a dear old boy. I'm so glad he's missed all this. He would have loathed and hated it all."

"Wonder what he's up to?" said Brookes.

"Oh, you know what Uncle Florian is. Here to-day and gone to-morrow, so to speak. He probably remembered that he wanted to buy an old master at Christie's, and rushed up to London without a word to any of us."

"He's interested in art?" asked Von Hoffmann, in as negligent a tone as he could assume. He was particularly anxious not to let them think he was pumping them.

"Rather," said Brookes. "He's got a very

swagger collection of pictures and what-nots. Hasn't he, Celia?"

"He's certainly got some very good things. But, then, he can afford them."

"He seems to be rather an absent-minded sort of person."

"Uncle Florian absent-minded!" Celia laughed. "I should think so. He forgets things in the most amazing way—things that he's in the middle of doing. He'll start a game of croquet by himself, and then forget all about it, and go for a walk into Pangbourne still carrying his mallet."

"Why this sudden interest in Mr. Root?" said Brookes abruptly, and Von Hoffmann saw that he could no longer extract unconscious information.

"Professional love of knowledge," he answered lightly; but Celia was not deceived. She stopped and looked at him with her clear, brown eyes.

"You're concealing something," she said. "I believe Uncle Florian has come back. Come on, Leslie, let's go and see." She ran swiftly and gracefully across the lawn, followed by the young man.

"A charming creature," murmured Von Hoffmann philosophically. "Ah! these English. You never know where you are with them. Scrum-

half, sportsman, nice-looking lad! And yet he might conceal anything behind that public-school mask."

His soliloquy was interrupted by the swinging, splendid approach of Lavender Arlington. The German turned his head to watch her, but did not move to meet her.

"*Guten Morgen*, Herr Inspector," she cried gaily. "That's all the German I know."

He bowed, and clicked his heels in military style, a trick which always helped to break the ice with strangers in England by making them smile inwardly.

"It is a lovely morning, Miss Arlington. When are you coming again to Berlin?"

She smiled a brilliant smile. "You knew I had been? How clever of you. Did you come to see me?"

"Indeed I did. Four times running."

"Four times. How terribly sweet of you, Mr. Hoffmann. I do think that's sweet of you."

"As a matter of fact, it was your young tenor who took me there."

Her smile vanished abruptly.

"Harry Venables?"

"Yes. I suspected him of smuggling cocaine."

"Harry smuggling? Oh, how absurd! He wasn't, of course."

"He was, of course," was the rather grim reply.

There was a slight pause, and then Von Hoffmann said slowly, "Miss Arlington, I think I know the part you've played in this Harden murder, and I think I know why you've played it."

If he expected to frighten the actress, or bluff her into betraying any sort of emotion, he failed. She looked at him steadily under her dark brows, and answered tranquilly:

"Really? And what part do you assign to me in the drama?"

Von Hoffmann had a mother from Lorraine, and he was half French. Occasionally in his career—perhaps a couple of dozen times altogether—he had flashes of intuition, which came from some unexpected, unconscious corner of his brain, flashes which he could not account for and which he was the first to admit were out of keeping with the rest of his Teutonic person and mind.

One of these flashes came now. He had failed to bluff this consummate actress into so much as

a blink. But when she asked him, with a trace of a half-triumphant, half-amused smile, "What part do you assign to me in the drama?" he replied instantly:

"The part of understudy to the leading lady."

Then the storm broke. The consummate actress was submerged in the tempestuously furious woman, the carefully acquired veneer of manners was submerged in a more remote and less-polished past.

"Understudy to that little swine?" she exclaimed, with a lightning flash of her black eyes, a clenching of white fists, and an accent that would have sounded to an Englishman as if it had originated on the eastern side, say, of Temple Bar.

"Me? Me play second fiddle to that little sweep? Not bloody likely. I never played second fiddle to anyone in my life, and I'm not going to begin now. You can take that from me, Mr. Whatever-you-call-yourself."

Von Hoffmann answered quietly, "But I think you were playing second fiddle to her."

"It's a damned lie!" she answered vehemently. "And you're a damned liar to suggest it."

"It wasn't your door he was found outside, you know."

She glared at him venomously, and said, "What are you trying to suggest, Mr. Copper?"

"I'm trying to suggest that Harden was more interested in Miss Waldingham than in you."

"Oh, you are, are you? Well, let me tell you that I could have married Ferdinand Harden any time during the last four years if I'd wanted to."

"Except during the last four months, eh?"

Lavender Arlington twisted her handkerchief into a little hard ball, and did not reply for a moment. She began to say something, and then stopped. The detective seized the opportunity, and said earnestly:

"Look here, Miss Arlington, you're in a tight corner."

"I am?" she exclaimed shrilly. "What the hell is there to put me in a tight corner?"

"It's that motor drive in the early morning," answered Von Hoffmann, as if he were explaining something to a child, and the actress started perceptibly.

"Well, what about it?" Her tone was slightly defiant.

"Well, I put it to you, Miss Arlington. What happens to you when my friend Fleming discovers what you went out for?"

"He won't," she snapped, and then bit her lip when the detective answered swiftly:

"Then there was a reason."

She saw that she had made a slip, and decided instantly on boldness. "Of course there was a reason. You none of you believed that I went out because it was a lovely morning."

"To go back to my original question," said Von Hoffmann blandly. "What happens—let us say if rather than when—what happens if Fleming finds out what you went for?"

"Nothing happens."

"Not even if he finds, for instance, a pair of your shoes with a bloodstain on them?"

She looked steadily at him, and replied, "I suppose that would be an awkward thing to have to explain."

"Very," was the dry response.

"In that case," replied Miss Arlington lightly. "I had better go indoors and think up an explanation"; and she turned round in her best dramatic style and walked back into the house.

"Dear me," said Von Hoffmann. "Dear me. What was it that she did at that hour of the morning? Drat the girl?"

At that moment Celia Waldingham came out again, and it was easy to see that she had heard

about the discovery of the body. "And drat that St. John," added Von Hoffmann under his breath.

"Miss Waldingham," he called out, and then walked across to her. "I see you've heard about it."

"Yes. Mr. St. John has just told me," she replied in a low voice.

"Come out into the middle of the lawn for a moment. We're too near the house for my liking. Let us stroll up and down. Now, Miss Waldingham, it may not be your uncle at all."

"But in that case my uncle must have—must have killed the man, and that's utterly impossible."

"You mean it's utterly impossible because he isn't the sort of man who would commit a murder?"

"Yes. Uncle Florian wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Then you think it must be he who's been——"

"I'm afraid so," she answered almost inaudibly.

"Have you any idea why anyone would want to kill him?"

"Herr Von Hoffmann, it's all too horrible," Celia cried. "Who would want to kill poor old Uncle Florian? Why should all this hideousness have happened to us? It seems utterly incredible

when you look at the lovely summer's day, and the flowers, and the river, that all this horrible crime and murder should be all round us." She shivered, and went on in a low voice: "Who has done it all? Can't you stop it? Why doesn't something happen? I want to get away out of it all."

"Why?"

"Because the whole place has become horrible. I've known this garden ever since I was quite young, and now it's become hateful, hateful. And it isn't all over yet. Someone else will have to die." The last words were spoken in a whisper, and the detective held his breath for fear of breaking the spell, in case the girl was going to say something else.

She gave a deep sigh, and went on: "But who —who is it that will be caught and killed?"

Von Hoffmann felt as if he were attending a spiritualist séance, where a cough or a sneeze might interfere with the atmosphere and ruin the experiment. But nothing more came, and Celia's next words were a matter-of-fact question. "When do you think we shall be allowed to go away?"

"I don't know," answered the German slowly. He was thinking hard and fast. "I don't know. You must ask Fleming. The decision will rest

with him. For my part, I shall advise him to let each person go away as soon as he is convinced that he—or she——" He paused.

"Yes?"

"That he or she has told him everything that he—or she—knows or suspects or thinks about these murders." He had stopped walking, and was facing her, looking sternly down.

She met his eyes for a moment and then lowered hers.

"Why do you—what are you—I don't quite see——" She stumbled badly, but he made no attempt to help her out, and she had to find the words herself.

"In that case, would you recommend him to let me—to let any of us go now?"

"No."

"Not even me, Inspector?" She tried to talk lightly.

"Not even you."

"But you don't mean that I'm concealing anything?"

"I mean that you're concealing one thing."

"What is it?" Celia said faintly.

"You're concealing the fact that Leslie Brookes had good cause to hate your Uncle Florian."

CHAPTER XII

THE FINDING OF THE BOOTS

"What makes the whole thing so complicated," said Fleming to his German colleague that evening after dinner, "is the peculiar importance of Harden. If we find John Smith of Lewisham lying in his kitchen with his throat cut, our job is a fairly easy one, because of John Smith's limitations. He has a limited number of friends, a limited number of enemies, a limited number of activities, tastes, hobbies, and so on. But Harden is a different stamp of man."

"Very different," put in Von Hoffmann drily.

"There are so many people in this house with a common factor—their connection with Baltania. Any of them might have had a reason for killing the man. Even our vague host—I can imagine a score of reasons why he might want Harden out of the way."

"What sort of things?"

"Oh, I don't know. I was merely giving him as an example. But the roots of this thing may go back many years."

Fleming knocked his pipe out and began to fill it again, and Von Hoffmann pulled at his immense cigar.

"I don't care," cried the latter at last, rather impatiently. "I don't care how many years it goes back. But if it went back to the Day of Creation we shouldn't be any nearer explaining those rabbits, or those spots of blood at the wrong end of the corridor, or those two messages in the different handwritings. There are too many things about this case, Fleming, that I can't understand. We've got any amount of motives, and quite a fair amount of potential murderers, but, damn it all, what did they want to muck about with those rabbits for?"

Fleming had seldom seen his Teutonic friend so roused.

"What about the Lavender lady?" he asked with a grin, to make a diversion.

"Ah! The divine creature. What a spirit, what eyes, what magnificence! But where has she hidden those shoes with the bloodstain on them? That's what I want to know."

"Well, I've got a hundred men and Lord knows how many troops of Boy Scouts looking for them."

"It will be interesting," said Von Hoffmann,

directing a heavy cloud of cigar smoke at the ceiling, "to see where the stains are on the shoes."

"And presumably on the stockings."

"Ah! the stockings. If there are spots on the stockings, Miss Lavender is in for it, as you say. But if there is only blood on the soles of the shoes, then she might get off. She would then admit to having found the body and having stepped in the pool of blood."

"And what if there is blood on the uppers as well as the soles?"

"It would convince me, but it mightn't convince a jury."

There was a knock at the door, and Sergeant Maitland's head appeared.

"Reports just come, sir. Will you take them now?"

"Yes. Come in, Maitland. Anything of interest?"

"Well, sir, that Kauskas crossed over from Newhaven to Dieppe on Saturday afternoon. The passport man on the boat happened to notice the name, and gave a fair description of him. Here it is."

Fleming glanced at it, muttering, "'Blond,

medium size, pale, small moustache'—yes, that's him."

"So it is Uncle Florian," said Von Hoffmann, "whom we've fished out of the Thames."

"The Yard have wired to Paris, sir, and to Baltania. And there's that young woman, sir."

"Which one?" said Fleming sharply.

"Miss Arlington. She stopped her car at a village called Crowmarsh Gifford, near Wallingford, and sent off a parcel."

"A parcel." Both the Inspectors sat bolt upright.

"When I say she sent it off, sir, she gave it to the postman with a pound note and asked him to send it for her. He noticed where it was addressed to—Singapore."

"Singapore," muttered Fleming. "So that's where the shoes have gone. Posted on Monday morning. Hm! Get me the Chief Constable on the telephone, Maitland, and throw me over *The Times*. There's a whole bundle of them in that corner. Yes, here we are. Out-going mail to Singapore left this morning by the good ship *Ferrovia*. Ha, ha, Von Hoffmann, we'll get those dainty little shoes yet."

There was no answer, and Fleming was sur-

prised to see an expression of puzzlement on the German's face. He was staring at the ceiling with wrinkled brows.

"What's up?"

"I don't know," was the slow answer. "Nothing, perhaps. What sort of a place is this something-or-other Gifford?"

"It's a small village, presumably. Where's the map? Yes. There it is. Half a dozen farms and a shop and a post office. You know the sort of thing."

Von Hoffmann scowled at the ceiling, and then exclaimed. "It's all wrong, Fleming. I'm sure it's all wrong."

"What is?"

"Well, consider. Here's a highly talented young lady. She is deeply involved in the murder of her lover, and she never gives anything away at all. That takes a bit of nerve for a start. Then she finds that she must hide these shoes. Instead of chucking them into the river or burying them in a field, where sooner or later we'd be certain to find them, she decides on the bold course of posting them to a fictitious address at the other end of the world. That's just in keeping with her character. She's bold and she's clever."

"Very well. What's your trouble?"

"My dear chap! It's not clever to pick out a tiny village, swoop down in a big car, throw pound notes about, and leave the parcel to be examined by a handful of villagers who've nothing else to do. No wonder the man remembered Singapore. I bet it was the first parcel that ever went to Singapore from whatever-it-is Gifford."

"There's something in that," conceded Fleming cautiously.

"Of course there's something in it."

"But you must remember that people always make one mistake, even the cleverest of them."

"But not such a crashing howler as this one. No, my lad, there's a catch in this."

"Catch or no catch," retorted the cautious Scotsman, "I'm going to ask the Chief Constable to get the mail bags opened on the *Ferrovia*."

"There's no harm in that. But if I were you I should certainly go on inquiring into that talented young lady's movements on Monday morning."

"Anyway," said Fleming, "she never carried that stone rabbit up from the river bank."

"Ah! That cursed rabbit!" murmured the other. "He is certainly a problem."

"The whole thing's a problem. And there are

lots of people who know a great deal more than they say."

The door was flung open and Leslie Brookes marched in, his face extremely red and his usually immaculate black bow-tie disarranged. "Look here," he began, talking as he came in, "What the devil to you mean by your hints and damned innuendoes?—I'm talking to you, Mr. Hoffmann."

The German blinked amiably, but the young man went on, without giving him a chance to reply, "Miss Waldingham's just been telling me. I got it out of her. You practically accused me of killing Root. Why don't you come and say these things right out in front of my face, instead of going to people behind my back?"

Von Hoffmann lay back comfortably in his chair. "It isn't my business to accuse anybody. The nearest I got to it was when I practically accused Miss Waldingham of thinking you might have killed Root."

The young man's dark scowl grew even darker.

"Well, it's a damned lie!"

"What is? That you killed him, or that Miss Waldingham thinks you did?"

"Both."

"The first may be; I hope it is. The second

certainly isn't. Miss Waldingham knows you had every reason to kill Harden——"

"So I had, by God! The swine!"

"And that you had a good reason for disliking Mr. Root."

"So I had."

"What was your reason, Mr. Brookes?" interposed Fleming smoothly.

"It's a thing I can't prove," replied the young man sulkily, "but I'm absolutely certain that Root swindled my mother out of a lot of money a few years ago."

"I understood that this Root was an absent-minded, eccentric art collector."

"Yes, I know. But I'm positive that he was hand-in-glove with a man called Harrison. It was Harrison who cheated my mother. I went down to see him once—I wanted to give him a damned good horsewhipping—down at his office in the City. I didn't see him. They swore he was out. But I saw Root through an open door, sitting there with his hat off dictating to a typist."

"Go on, Mr. Brookes; this is interesting."

"They shut the door at once and slung me out. I went back twice more, but I couldn't get in, and then, the third time I went, the firm had gone."

"Gone? Where to?"

"I don't know. I gave it up then. But when I told Root about it he denied all knowledge of it, and said he'd hardly ever been east of Ludgate Circus in the last thirty years. But I know it was him all right."

"What was the name of the firm? Were they stockbrokers?"

"I don't know what they were. Some sort of bucket shop. Harrison & Harrison, I think the name was, in Winchester House. It all happened about four years ago—a year before my mother died."

"And you're absolutely certain that it was Root?"

"I was at the time. Absolutely. Of course, I know it sounds an incredible story, and no one ever believes me. Even Celia doesn't. She was very fond of him. He's—he was, rather—her mother's brother."

Leslie Brookes had quite forgotten his rage, and was talking normally and composedly. Von Hoffmann eyed him sternly, and could detect no sign of anything but straightforward candour in his story.

"Very well, Mr. Brookes," said Fleming. "It's an interesting story. Now, do you think you would be kind enough to send my Sergeant

Maitland to me, and also to ask Sir Arthur if he could spare me a minute? And then I want you to write down as careful an account as you can of your movements on the night of last Saturday —the night," he added a little sternly, "that Mr. Root was killed. Your account will be verified as far as possible, so try to make it accurate."

"Well," said Von Hoffmann, when the young man had gone out. "I wonder, I very much wonder."

"So do I," replied Fleming. "Oh, Maitland, I want you to get headquarters on to finding the antecedents of this firm"—he jotted down the name on a slip of paper—"the present whereabouts of it, and the partners. Also to find out Root's financial past, and his work in the City, if any."

"Yes, sir," answered the sergeant, "and there's just been a telephone message from Birmingham, sir. A lorry driver has reported that he found last night a pair of boots in his lorry, one with blood on the toe-cap and both with blood on the soles."

"Birmingham? What's that got to do with us?"

"The lorry came from Aldershot. The driver

remembers passing Pangbourne at about half-past two on the morning of Monday."

"'Half-past two on the morning of Monday!'" exclaimed both the inspectors, and then they looked at each other and whistled simultaneously.

"By thunder!" said Fleming, "that's important. It may help to clear up the whole show. I suppose the boots are coming along?"

"Yes, sir. By car. They ought to be here in an hour or so."

"Very well, Maitland."

"Do you want me?" said a rather tired voice, and Sir Arthur drifted in. He looked sad and weary, and the lines under his eyes made him appear an old man.

"I am sorry to disturb you again, Sir Arthur," said Fleming, with a note of real regret in his voice. The baronet was a pathetic figure. "But it is rather important to have some details about the life of Mr. Root."

"Poor Florian," said the other in a low voice. "I knew him all my life. We were kids together at school. And, of course, I married his sister."

"Was he a rich man?" asked Fleming.

"Fair to middling. I should say he had about ten to twelve thousand pounds a year."

"How did he make it?"

"In the family business—the Baltanian Trading Company. His father and my father founded it many years ago. But Florian was no business man, and he retired when he was about thirty."

"Did you and he inherit the business?"

"Yes."

"In equal shares?"

"Yes."

"And Mr. Root never went into business again?"

Sir Arthur's tired manner freshened for a moment or two, and there was a touch of indignation in his voice as he said, "I think I know what you mean, Inspector. You've been talking to young Brookes, and he's been telling you his story of Harrison's bucket shop."

Fleming was a little surprised at Waldingham's astuteness, and admitted that young Brookes had said something to that effect.

"It's a bee in his bonnet," exclaimed the baronet warmly. "He's bored us with the story fifty times. Everyone knows that Florian wanted to marry Alison Brookes—Alison Stanhope as she was then—but it's absurd to go about saying that twenty years later he tried to ruin her as a revenge for being refused."

"Is that the story? Brookes didn't mention that."

"Yes. It's idiotic. Florian was utterly useless at business, and utterly incapable of hurting anyone. He was the best fellow in the world."

"And you never heard of this Harrison?"

"Only in Leslie's story."

"But it's true his mother was ruined?"

"Practically so. She speculated, and lost three-quarters of her capital."

Fleming pondered so long that at last the baronet coughed and inquired if that was all.

"Yes, thank you, Sir Arthur," said the detective, but Von Hoffmann held up an enormous hand.

"May I ask a question? Are you—or were you, Sir Arthur—ever a Son of Liberty?"

"No."

"But this unfortunate Mr. Root was?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I was astonished to find out that he was."

Fleming opened his eyes wide.

"You didn't know? When did you discover it?"

"Last Saturday. The day he was killed."

Von Hoffmann got up and walked three times

up and down the library. "Let me get this right," he said at last. "You knew Herr Root all his life, and it wasn't until the last day of it that you found out he was a Son of Liberty?"

"Isn't it amazing?" agreed Sir Arthur. "You can imagine how astounded I was."

"And how did you find out?"

"By the mark on his arm—the circle and the dot."

"On the upper arm?"

"Yes. I saw it when we all bathed on Saturday morning. I spoke to him about it then."

"Thank you, sir. That is all I had to ask."

When Sir Arthur had gone out, Von Hoffmann turned to Fleming and shook his cigar at him.

"It's all wrong," he cried. "It's all absolutely wrong."

"What is wrong?"

"Everything. I feel it in my bones. I know it is. And yet I can't lay my finger on anything. Come on. Let's go to bed. I'm tired of thinking."

"You go along," said Fleming. "I'm going to wait for Lavender's shoes from Birmingham."

An hour later he knocked gently at Von Hoffmann's door.

"What is it?" asked a sleepy voice. "I was

dreaming that my handicap had been brought down to three. It was a wonderful dream."

"It's only to tell you about Lavender's shoes."

"Well?"

"They're a pair of men's boots, size eight, and made in Riga."

CHAPTER XIII

THE BOTTLE OF DOPE

On the following day a settled gloom seemed to have descended upon Westbrook House. The death of Mr. Root had completely unnerved Sir Arthur Waldingham, and Celia's spirits were profoundly depressed by the sudden plunge from a quiet, sheltered, pleasant existence into a vortex of murder and tragedy. The actual crimes of violence and bloodshed were, in a way, not so horrible as the idea that people's minds could descend to such hideous depths of rage and fury against fellow-creatures that they stabbed and struck with such blind and malignant savagery. It was not the murders that affected Celia so much as the knowledge that such murderers really existed. She longed to get away from the scenes where she had known so many happy years, and where she would never know another happy moment. On the previous evening Leslie Brookes had cajoled and coaxed out of her the gist of Von Hoffmann's conversation with her on

the lawn, with its apparent accusation against him of having been concerned in the murder of Florian Root. Leslie's passionate and violent denials had completely convinced Celia. At his first outbreak of indignation and protests she had flung her arms round his neck and whispered, "I know you didn't, darling. You don't need to convince me."

But, all the same, she lacked the courage, or the complete faith in her lover that she claimed to possess, to ask him the question that was drumming away inside her head, night and day: What did he know about Harden's death? That was the question the answer to which she feared, and, in order to avoid having to put it, either by a word or a look, she decided to avoid Leslie altogether on the next morning. She breakfasted in her room, came down late, and slipped away to a secluded corner of the grounds with a book that she didn't want to read, and which she couldn't have read even if she had wanted to.

Leslie, himself having completely dismissed from his mind the suggestion that he was in any way connected with the death of Root, came down quite cheerfully to breakfast, but became gloomier and gloomier as the morning wore on and Celia did not appear. At length, about mid-

day, he sent up a message to her room, and found to his disgust that she had already gone out. He searched the grounds, but Celia saw his approach to her hiding place and retreated still farther behind a thick clump of rhododendrons, and the young man returned to the house in a state of furious sulkiness. Sir Arthur did not stir all day out of the gunroom, where he sat with his head resting on his hands trying to read *The Field* and *Country Life*.

Lavender Arlington pulled a deck chair out on to the edge of the lawn and carefully posed herself in an attitude that was clearly intended to convey her detachment from her present surroundings and her extreme importance in other, more important, surroundings. She was wearing long Spanish earrings, her make-up was even more brilliant than usual, her lips more dazzlingly geranium, her silk stockings thinner, and her display of long, elegant legs even more lavish. She smoked an interminable succession of cigarettes, and read, or pretended to read, a French novel which had been forbidden in England by the commissioner of police and seized at the customs on the order of the home secretary.

The only member of the household who appeared completely at his ease was Peter Petro-

vich St. John. After a heavy breakfast, he lit one of his host's longest cigars and sauntered out into the garden. It was a glorious summer morning. There was still a morning freshness in the air before the windless heat of midday set in. The sky was a shimmering expanse of unbroken blue, and the river twinkled and sparkled at the end of the velvet lawn. It was the sort of day that is impossible in any other country but England, the sort of day when the sun can shine without scorching and when the wind can drop without leaving a sultriness behind.

Peter St. John had several cares in the world any one of which might have damped the spirits of a less buoyant nature. He had no money to speak of, no profession, no country, and no home, and he was liable at any moment to be arrested as an accessory to one murder, if not two.

But Peter St. John had a buoyant nature, and, as he stood outside the dining-room window and surveyed the scene of tranquillity and horticulture, he forgot all his troubles, and only thought how lovely the garden and the river looked, how excellent a cigar his host kept, and how glad he was that he had sent his gray suit to be pressed before following Ferdinand Harden to the neighbourhood of Pangbourne.

Then he saw Lavender Arlington in her deck chair and strolled across the lawn.

"Are those the legs that launched a thousand ships?" he observed casually as he approached, and he smiled a little ironically as the actress rearranged her attitude with a sort of sulky haste.

"That's spoilt her pose for her," he thought, as he gracefully seated himself on the lawn beside the chair.

"And where are the watchdogs of the law to-day, Miss Arlington? Have you seen them creeping about with microscopes and telescopes and stethoscopes and periscopes and horoscopes and—and—that's all I know. No, it isn't; there's stereoscope as well."

"No, I haven't," she replied coldly.

"I expect they're preparing to pounce just when we least expect it."

"Speak for yourself, Mr. St. John. I'm not afraid of them pouncing on me."

"That German fellow has a cold and glassy eye. Doesn't it make you feel all queer when he swivels it round on to you?"

"Not in the least."

St. John heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Hm! That's what comes of having a clear conscience. Now, I haven't got a clear conscience." He

paused and added, "But I've got something I value a very good deal more. I've got a clear alibi, and that's worth fifty consciences."

Miss Arlington made no comment, and St. John proceeded in a thoughtful tone, "Now take your case, Lavender——"

"My name is Miss Arlington."

"I know it is, darling. Now, take your case." He ignored her movement of annoyance. "With all the clearness of your conscience you haven't got a shred of alibi, have you? You could easily have done in old Ferdy, couldn't you?"

The actress looked straight in front of her, and said majestically, "I have no wish to prolong this conversation, Mr. St. John," and began to get up.

With a cry of anguish St. John seized her arm and exclaimed, "Don't get up. For God's sake don't get up."

Thoroughly startled, the actress sank back in the chair and turned a pair of frightened eyes on him.

"Thank God!" he said with a sigh of relief. "You nearly made a hideous blunder."

"Why, what did I do?"

"You were about to sweep off, with a glance at the stalls, in your most dignified and magnificent

style. Well, you can't look dignified getting out of a deck chair. It can't be done."

"Damn your soul!" exclaimed the actress vindictively, and St. John laughed gaily.

"Look here, you young puppy," she went on fiercely, "what the devil are you doing here anyway, and what's all your talk about alibis? Who are you?"

"I'm a Son of Baltanian Liberty," replied St. John, with an air of mock dignity.

"What! You're one of those swine?" the actress exclaimed. "You ought all of you to be shot and thrown into the sea. I suppose you came over to hunt down Ferdinand."

St. John glanced round cautiously and lowered his voice. "It is true," he said, "that our headquarters dispatched me and little Kauskas, as it were, to dispatch Ferdy, but I was much too careful. Kauskas lost his head, dispatched the wrong man, and beat it."

This time the actress did struggle out of the deck chair, and she towered over the Anglo-Baltanian. "And you have the nerve," she said in a vibrating voice, "you have the nerve to sit there and tell me you came over to assassinate the greatest and noblest man in the world?"

"But I didn't do it," remarked St. John, tap-

ping the side of his nose with his forefinger in a way that made him look roguish and sly. "But I didn't do it, my fair one, and I wonder if you can say the same."

"I loved Ferdinand Harden," she said proudly.

"Then why did you try to stab him two years ago in the night club in Reval?"

Every vestige of natural colour fled from her face, leaving queer patches of dull gray under the brilliant rouge. She began to speak, but only a gasp resulted.

"Don't worry, I shan't speak about it. But it might come out," St. John proceeded. "I was second saxophone in the band at the time. Let me see, it was called the Savoia. Foul hole, wasn't it?"

"You swear you won't tell?" whispered Lavender Arlington.

"Oh, I won't tell. It was that Esthonian woman, I suppose, who—er—came between you? And an English one this time."

"I swear I didn't kill him, St. John. I swear I didn't."

"That's all right," he answered casually. "I don't care two straws who did kill him so long as it wasn't me."

The actress stared at him for a moment, and

then wheeled round and vanished into the house. St. John lay back on the grass, tilted his hat over his eyes, folded his hands across his chest, and observed comfortably to a skylark which was in full blast of song a couple of hundred feet above him, "Ah, well, old chap, you can say what you like, like a glowworm golden in a dell of dew and all that sort of stuff, but what I say is, 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'"

"How very true," said a deep voice behind him, and the next moment the burly form of the German detective had sunk into the deck chair.

"Do go away, Hindenburg," protested St. John without moving. "I can't stand your cold and glassy eye. One of these days it'll make me confess something I've never done, out of sheer nerves."

"Is there anything you haven't done?" answered the German with a slow laugh. "Do you know, Herr St. John, that I think you're the funniest thing in all this funny case."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you're such a clown."

"Thank you very much. Where exactly does my clownishness lie?"

"There's a very big difference," said Von Hoffmann thoughtfully, "between a clown and

a clownish person. One is awfully clever, the other's awfully silly. You're awfully clever, and you're juggling all the time between a British prison and a Baltanian knife."

"What a confoundedly intelligent old elephant you are," exclaimed St. John. "Ludendorff was a kid compared to you. Wasn't it cursed hard luck getting this job from that comic Ku Klux Klan?—damn their souls!"

"The Sons of Liberty?"

"Yes, sink them and rot them!"

"What happened? Tell me all about them."

"Well, they're not unlike the K. K. K. They started originally in the 'eighties to kill Russian police spies, when Baltania was a Russian province. My mother enrolled me when I was a kid. Then after the war, when Baltania had got her confounded liberty, the Sons ought to have disbanded. Instead of which, they got keener than ever—and more incompetent than ever; Baltania for the Balts, down with dictators, down with profiteers, down with foreign capitalists! You know the sort of thing?"

Von Hoffmann nodded.

"So, of course, when Harden set up to run a revolt, they were down on him. They drew lots

—faked them, I expect—and poor little Kauskas and I got them."

"Tell me," said Von Hoffmann, "are they really dangerous?"

"Oh, Lord, yes. Some of them are perfect fiends. Real nasty dangerous swobs. I don't like them a bit."

There was an unexpected interruption to this slow, almost languid conversation. A sudden sound made the German turn his head, and the recumbent St. John raise his, towards the rapidly approaching figure of Ellenberger, Harden's big blond secretary. When he came within a dozen yards of the couple, he set loose a flood of strange sounds which the German assumed to be Baltanian. St. John tilted his hat back and surveyed the man without answering, a procedure which seemed to infuriate him, for he shook his fist and began to shout. St. John seemed to be amused, and occasionally interjected a remark. Ellenberger worked himself up into a perfect frenzy of rage, and then, apparently feeling that the time for words had passed and for deeds had come, he rushed at the man on the grass and seemed about to hurl himself upon him when he was brought up short by the sight of a stumpy, black auto-

matic pistol which had miraculously appeared in the German detective's hand.

"*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*" asked the detective. and the man nodded sullenly. A brief conversation in German followed, which was ended by the secretary thrusting his hand into his pocket and bringing out a small bottle. He handed it to the detective, who smelt it and then addressed St. John.

"Do you know what our friend says this is?"

"No, I don't. But I know what it is," was the unexpected answer.

"Well?"

"It's the bottle of dope that Kauskas brought over. I was to give it to Ellenberger—that was Kauskas's idea—while he polished off Harden. I blackballed that suggestion *tout de suite*, believe me."

"What does the label say?"

"The label explains," said St. John, resuming his comfortable position on the grass, "the label explains it contains the remains of the brains of the great Aristotle. Actually, it says, roughly speaking, 'Bromide.'"

"Do you know where he says he found it?"

"I've just heard him say so. It leaves me cold."

Von Hoffmann hoisted himself out of the deck chair and addressed the two men in German, warning them that if they attempted any sort of quarrelling in his absence he would punch their jaws for them, and then set out in search of Fleming.

He found him in the library, at his favourite desk, poring over a couple of documents. "Look here," he began, but Fleming interrupted with the words, "Look here yourself."

"What is it?"

"It's the papers that were found in Root's pockets. I've had them dried and photographed. They're two letters to Root from a man called Harrison."

"From a man called Harrison!" exclaimed Von Hoffmann, with a start and then he repeated more slowly, emphasizing each syllable, "From a man called Harrison."

"Exactly," said Fleming, speaking with the same slow emphasis. "From a man called Harrison."

"But I say——" said the German, and Fleming again echoed his words.

"Exactly. But I say——"

"Half a moment," exclaimed Von Hoffmann, "let me think aloud for a couple of seconds. If

it's the same Harrison, then Brookes was right and this Root was mixed up with a firm of financial sharks, in which case Waldingham is a liar or else was deceived by Root, and, whichever it is, Root was a liar and a crook. And if Root was a liar and a crook, it might give us the motive for this Kauskas fellow killing him."

"We must find Harrison," said Fleming. "I fancy he may be able to explain a few things. Did you want me for something?"

"Oh, yes. That Ellenberger—you know him—has found this bottle of dope, and St. John swears it was a bottle that Kauskas brought over from Baltania."

"Where did he find it?"

"In St. John's suitcase."

Fleming started up. "What!" he exclaimed.

"In St. John's suitcase."

"Does St. John know he found it there?"

"Yes. And let me tell you that he took the news very coolly."

"He would," was the dry response. "Maitland's been through St. John's kit twice with a fine comb, and there wasn't a bottle there."

"You mean it's been put there since?"

"Must have been."

"And St. John took the news calmly because

he knows that Maitland's been through his belongings."

"Yes. He's a cool card. By the way, have you seen the famous boots?"

He pointed to a pair of patent-leather, pointed-toed, foreign-looking boots—the sort of boots that can be seen in scores in the eastern districts of London. The wearers usually have pasty faces and cloth caps. There were stains of blood on the toe of one and on the soles of both of them.

"Not exactly Miss Lavender's style," he observed.

"Then what the devil did she send off in such a hurry on the Monday morning?" exploded the German indignantly.

"We shan't know that until the Singapore mails are opened."

"You won't get anything there," answered the other. "There was a second parcel, sent off to Patagonia or New South Wales or somewhere. You mark my words. That what-do-you-call-it Gifford is all nonsense."

"In the meantime, who put the bottle into St. John's bag?"

"If it ever was there at all."

"Yes. That's true. If it ever was there at all.

But somehow that fellow Ellenberger looks too silly and too honest to go in for games of that sort."

"You never can be sure," said Von Hoffmann sagely, lighting a cigar.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FIRST DEATH OF FLORIAN ROOT

The hot summer's day tapered off into a long, cool evening. The depression which had settled upon the household at Westbrook had deepened and darkened until the whole garden seemed to take on an air of funereal gloom as the shadows crept across the lawn. Celia felt that the silence and inactivity of the detectives made it worse. They hardly appeared in the garden at all now, and spent all their time either sitting in the library or telephoning to London or going off on motor drives to unknown destinations. She had always imagined that a police pursuit of a murderer was a hectic, energetic affair, in which there was incessant arresting, detaining, and cross-questioning. But this was all so slow and so vague. The detectives seemed to start on a line of investigation and then drop it again. They were so capricious in their questionings, too, jumping from one subject to another in the most aimless way. And yet was it so aimless? That

German had made the most horrible suggestions about Leslie and his feelings towards both the dead men, and then all his talk about Leslie being headstrong at football. Was that all just talk about football, or was there another, a deeper meaning in it? Leslie was headstrong; he had a quick and violent temper, easily aroused, easily appeased. If he had found Ferdinand Harden with his hand on her bedroom door at one o'clock in the morning—— In spite of the warmth of the afternoon Celia shivered with real genuine cold. But would he have stabbed him? Wouldn't he simply have rushed at him and struck him blindly and madly with his fists? But if Harden had defended himself with a knife, and Leslie had got hold of it in the struggle—— She shivered again. "He's got no right," she cried aloud suddenly in the solitude of her corner of the garden, "he's got no right to go about making innuendoes against people and then to sit down in the library like a spider and do nothing more. It's unfair. It's horrible."

Somehow it was the inactivity of the detectives that worried her. If they had arrested Leslie and taken him to London, it wouldn't have been so bad. He would easily have proved his innocence and been released. But to go and practically ac-

cuse him and then do nothing more—it was as if they were waiting for something to happen, waiting for some bit of news or bit of evidence that would clinch their case against—against someone.

At last Celia could stand it no longer, and she went indoors in search of her father. She found him in the gunroom, pretending to himself that he was sorting and rearranging his fishing tackle and books of flies. He looked up as she entered, and his face brightened a little.

"Daddy, I can't stand much more of this," she cried. "Can't anything be done?"

"Nothing at all, I'm afraid, my dear," he answered. "We must just wait in patience."

"What for?"

He looked round vaguely, and then answered, "Well, my dear, I don't exactly know. For the capture of the murderer, I suppose."

"Daddy, darling," said Celia, "will you promise to take me away from here as soon as we're allowed to go? To Africa or to—to anywhere so long as it's a long way from here."

"I'll take you anywhere you like, my dear; but what about Leslie?"

She looked down, and then raised her eyes again. "What about him?"

"Aren't you going to—isn't he going to—I mean——"

"I don't know, Daddy. In any case, I'm not going to marry anyone till I've been away for a long, long trip with you somewhere."

"All right, my dear," said Sir Arthur almost cheerfully. "I'll see about getting tickets at once. Let me see. We might go to Capetown, and then go up to the Victoria Falls. How about that?"

"That will do as well as any other," she replied, in a tone so listless that her father looked at her in surprise.

"Hullo, what's the matter? You don't seem to want to go on."

"Oh, yes, I do. I do. Victoria Falls. Anywhere. Anywhere out of this"; and she fled from the room to avoid bursting into tears.

Sir Arthur scratched his head in perplexity for a moment or two, and then packed away his rods and fly books with the brisk air of a man who has made up his mind. When the gunroom had been neatly tidied to his satisfaction, he went to the library and entered with a little more than his usual assurance.

"I say, Fleming," he began, when his eyes fell upon a newcomer who was standing upon the hearthrug in earnest talk with the two inspectors.

"My dear George," he exclaimed warmly, "I had no idea you were down here. This is a very pleasant surprise. You'll stay the night, of course. I'll go and tell Celia." He was bustling out of the room again when Fleming detained him with a word. "Oh, Sir Arthur," he said. "Just the man we wanted. Do stay a moment."

"Certainly, if I can be of any use," exclaimed the baronet, relieved and delighted at the prospect of any sort of diversion from the boredom of the day.

"Mr. Norman has very kindly come down," went on the detective, "at my request, to discuss the question of Mr. Root's will."

Mr. Norman, an elderly man with a picturesque mass of white hair, a thin, lined, clean-shaven face, and an immaculate morning coat, who looked exactly what he was—a solicitor—nodded, and said, "It's a queer business."

Sir Arthur sat down. "What's queer about it, George?"

The solicitor pursed his lips, and assumed an air of professional severity.

"I don't like it, Arthur. I don't like it at all."

"Nor do I," mentioned Fleming. "Go ahead, Mr. Norman."

"Mr. Root left two wills," said the solicitor.

"In the first, he left certain small, or comparatively small, bequests, and the residue of his fortune to your daughter Celia." He held up a warning hand, and proceeded rapidly. "But don't get excited, Arthur, because he revoked that will and made a second will, and left his entire fortune to his business partner."

Sir Arthur wrinkled his brows. "His business partner? Florian's business partner? Nonsense. He never had one."

Mr. Norman shrugged his morning-coated shoulders. "I confess that I myself had never heard of him before, and I was considerably surprised to hear of his existence."

"But it must be a fake," protested the baronet. "It must be a forgery. What does the will say the fellow's name is?"

"Stephen Harrison."

"Stephen Harrison," whispered Sir Arthur hoarsely, and he clutched for a second at his heart. "Stephen Harrison. My God! My God!"

The two detectives stood motionless as statues, but the lawyer sprang forward with a cry. "Good heavens, what is the matter, Arthur?"

The unfortunate baronet rested his forehead on his hand and muttered drearily, "He was mine own familiar friend."

"I don't understand," said Norman, turning helplessly to the other two.

"I think we do," said Von Hoffmann gravely. "It is a bad business when a friend falls suddenly from a pedestal."

Sir Arthur looked up, and they saw that his face was haggard. "So it was Florian who cheated Alison Brookes. It was Florian who was hand-in-glove with a bucket-shop keeper. It was Florian who lied to us all with every breath of his life. Good God! I feel as if the world were crashing about my ears. There is only one thing more to happen now and that will complete the tale of woe and sorrow."

"What is that?" almost whispered the solicitor.

"The only thing left is that my daughter should marry young Leslie Brookes and that then these gentlemen should hang him for murder."

"For the murder of Harden?" said Von Hoffmann.

"No. I'm sure that he would never stab a man in the back," said Sir Arthur, with a little show of spirit. "Only weaklings or cowards would do that."

"Or women?" suggested the German tenta-

tively, but the baronet was too much occupied with his own thoughts to answer.

It was Fleming who broke the silence by a brisk, business-like question to the solicitor: "And now, Mr. Norman, can you tell us approximately the size of the property which this Harrison will inherit?"

"I can't tell you the full extent of it at present, Mr. Inspector," replied the lawyer. "The securities, mortgages, and so on that we hold for Mr. Root represent a sum of about seven hundred thousand pounds."

"Seven hundred thousand!" exclaimed Sir Arthur Waldingham, starting up. "Impossible! Florian didn't inherit a penny more than two hundred and twenty thousand, if as much, and he never did a stroke of work——" He stopped, and sat down again so abruptly that for a moment the others thought it was a collapse. Then he muttered, "Of course. I'd forgotten his bucket shop."

"It must have been an extremely successful bucket shop," observed Von Hoffmann.

"And that, of course," proceeded the solicitor smoothly, "need not represent—indeed, I feel certain, does not represent—the late gentleman's entire fortune. His pictures and works of art

would bring, I am told, a very considerable sum if sold at public auction—well into six figures."

"Six figures," muttered Von Hoffmann in perplexity. "What does that mean?"

"It means, sir," answered Mr. Norman, "a hundred thousand pounds or more. I have not yet had time to communicate with Mr. Root's bankers, but, for all I know, there may be more securities lying there. I should certainly think that the whole estate will be in the vicinity of a million sterling."

"You have had no communication from this Harrison?" asked Fleming.

"No. Not yet."

"And the will—the second will—is perfectly valid? Signature all right and that sort of thing?"

"So far as I can make out, everything is in order."

"And dated last Saturday?"

"Dated last Saturday, and witnessed by Alicia Mary Webbe and Edgar George Jacks."

"Who are they?"

"My parlourmaid and chauffeur," said Sir Arthur.

There was an exceptionally long silence after this. Sir Arthur remained motionless, as if dazed by the appalling revelation of the treachery of his

dead friend. The solicitor could think of nothing to say, and the two detectives were so lost in thought that they seemed almost to have fallen asleep, the Scotsman at his desk and the German leaning against the mantelpiece. When the latter did speak, the baronet and the lawyer perceptibly started, as if they too had begun to doze.

"Your friend Mr. Root, Sir Arthur," he said, "was he quite normal and cheerful on the Friday?"

"On the Friday? Yes, yes, I think so. Yes, I'm sure of it. He was in excellent spirits."

"And on the Saturday he was quiet and depressed?"

"Oh, dear me, no. He was in his very best form. He was a dear, gay fellow at his best, and on Saturday I thought I'd never seen him more cheerful. He quite took the lead that morning in all our doings."

"Did you think it was peculiar at the time?"

"Peculiar? Oh, no. I thought it was delightful he should take so much trouble to entertain the party."

"I've got one more question," said Fleming, "and then we can adjourn this meeting. Mr. Norman, what class of security did Mr. Root invest his money in?"

"A certain amount in British War Loan, a certain amount in artificial silk and brewery companies, and the remainder—about two-thirds, I should say—in Baltanian shares."

"Thank you. Then that is all, gentlemen. You wanted to speak to me, Sir Arthur, about something?"

"I don't think so. Did I?" answered the baronet. "Perhaps I did. This horrible affair about Florian has quite thrown me out of gear. Oh, yes, I remember. My daughter is very anxious to get away from here as soon as possible—you can understand she wants a change—and I thought of taking her to South Africa or somewhere like that. Do you think there's any chance of our being allowed to go soon?"

"I can't tell you, Sir Arthur, but I promise you that I'll let you know the instant that I know myself."

"You won't think I'm trying to fly from justice if I make a few inquiries about berths and passages, will you?" said the baronet, with a gallant attempt at a smile, and he went out with the solicitor.

"Well!" said the German, as soon as they were alone. "Now what about it?"

"Yes. Now what about it?" echoed Fleming.

"Our dear, delightful, eccentric, benevolent old Mr. Root has vanished into thin air, hasn't he?"

"Yes, and left behind him a thoroughly unpleasant person."

"And a foreign Baltanian capitalist. The sort of person that the Sons of Liberty are out gunning for. It gives a jolly good motive for Kauskas, doesn't it?"

"It does," answered Von Hoffmann thoughtfully. "And it would account for one or two other things. Listen to this, for instance. St. John is sent over to kill Harden. He comes over and makes up his mind to shirk the job. Kauskas follows him, reproaches him for shirking, and sets out on Friday night to do the trick himself. On Friday he sees, by chance, Root, who is also on the black list of these precious Sons. Root is a very different target. He is a small, weak, weedy little creature. Harden is as dangerous as a wildcat. Kauskas at once decides to alter his objective, kill Root, and rush off home to claim the credit of a glorious exploit, leaving St. John to face the music. He hides on Saturday, gets an opportunity on Saturday evening to kill Root, and gets to Newhaven in time to catch the night boat. That brings us back to where we were before—namely, to the theory that the 'outside

job' killed Root and the 'inside job' killed Harden."

"And the second rabbit?"

"Oh, damn the second rabbit! But, apart from that, doesn't all that sound fairly plausible?"

"It does," said Fleming, after a cautious consideration. "And what about the boots in the lorry?"

"Well, I can explain that too. The blood on the boots was Root's, not Harden's; how about that?"

"The lorry passed Pangbourne at half-past two on Monday morning. Kauskas killed Root early on Saturday night."

"But no one knows when the boots were put into the lorry. The lorry came from the south. Why shouldn't Kauskas have chucked them into it at Aldershot or somewhere on his way to the coast?"

"Well, that's possible," conceded Fleming, "but I doubt it."

"Frankly, so do I. I doubt everything in this case. But the only thing I am certain of is that there are two separate dramas at work here—one inside the house and one outside it."

"I agree with you there," said the Scotland Yard man. "And, as you've been kind enough to

sketch out a theory of the outside job that accounts for all the facts except about three quarters of them"—Von Hoffmann snorted indignantly—"I'll do one for the inside job, for your benefit."

Fleming got up, strolled to the window, and leaned against it. "Roughly speaking, this is a possibility," he began. "That woman Arlington was madly jealous of Harden and his obvious preference for Celia Waldingham."

"Wise man," put in Von Hoffmann.

"Shut up or I won't go on, and you'll miss a real educational treat. Very well. She was jealous. So she sent him a note in a disguised writing, telling him to come to Celia's room at one. Somehow she discovered, later on in the day, that he had spotted the handwriting to be a fake, so she sent him another note, this time in handwriting that was an attempt at a copy of Celia's. Harden tumbled to the second note—or, at any rate, thought there was a chance of an adventure—and came out. Now listen to this. Lavender was waiting a little way down from the top of the back stairs, and as soon as Harden came out of his room she stabbed him. That would account for the two blood spots at that end of the passage. But she not only wanted to

revenge herself on her faithless lover, she wanted to bring shame on Celia as well. So she dragged the body along the corridor and put his hands on to the handle, so as to leave fingerprints, and then, when she saw the man who had wronged her lying at her feet, she saw red and blindly stabbed him over and over again. And then she fled."

"It's a horrid tale," said Von Hoffmann after a moment. "A very horrid tale. And I won't deny that it is extremely possible. Then what do you think we shall find in her parcel that she sent to Singapore?"

Fleming lit his pipe with the utmost deliberation, and answered, "I think we shall find a blood-stained nightdress or dressing gown."

Von Hoffmann muttered again. "It is a very horrid tale. Such a very splendid lady"; and then he said, "And who wore the blood-stained boots?"

"The blood-stained boots play the same part in my theory, my dear chap," said Fleming with a grin, "that the second rabbit plays in yours. A damned annoyance."

"Let's consider your boots for a moment. I'm tired of considering my rabbit. Someone or other, wearing boots made in the Baltic States—

in Riga, to wit—trod in a pool of blood at one or other of the murders, i.e. on Saturday evening, late, or on Sunday night. If it was in Saturday's pool, then someone else trod in Sunday's, because you saw the marks. If the Riga-shod gentleman did his treading on Saturday, how and where did he meet a lorry that actually went past this house on the Sunday? And if he did it on Sunday, who the blazes was he? St. John has an alibi, Kauskas had got to France on Saturday night——"

"And might have doubled back," said Fleming suddenly.

Von Hoffmann blew several smoke rings before he answered slowly. "Yes. That's true. But it would be an incredibly bold thing to do. To commit a murder and get safely out of the country, and then to come back to commit another—whew! that would need a bit of nerve."

"In any case, I'll get inquiries started," said Fleming, picking up the telephone and sending a brief message to the constable whom he had placed on duty at the switchboard in the pantry.

"The only other people we know of," proceeded Von Hoffman, "are Harden himself and Ellenberger."

"The boots are not the size of either of these

two. The boots are size eight. Those two fellows' are tens."

"Then either they belong to yet another gentleman from the Baltic whose acquaintance we have yet to make, or else they belong to Kauskas or St. John."

"And St. John has a perfect alibi for all three nights."

"But suppose Root wasn't killed at night? He vanished some time after midday on Saturday."

Fleming abandoned his lounging attitude against the wall. "I say, Von Hoffmann, my lad, that's rather an idea. Peter Petrovich St. John hasn't got an alibi for the daytime, has he?"

"He hasn't mentioned one."

"The boat house is screened a little from the river," muttered Fleming, "and completely screened from the house. Could they—would they have dared to go out in broad daylight and drop the body overboard? I swear they wouldn't. But they might have killed him in the afternoon, and then waited till dusk before rowing him out. But, again, what a risk! Leaving a body lying about all day, and then one of them coming back to row it out into the river and the other

going up to London. No. It won't work. It's all wrong."

"What about this will?" said Von Hoffmann, abruptly changing the conversation. "Why did he make a new will on the morning of the day he was going to be killed?"

"He must have seen Kauskas on the Friday night, and realized that the Sons of Liberty were after him."

"That's a good reason for making a will, but not a good reason for making a new one."

"And here's another objection to that idea," said the Scotsman. "If he'd seen the avenger, so to speak, why would he have been so cheerful on the Saturday? However incompetent the Sons of Liberty are, no one could be actually more cheerful than ever after hearing that they were on the warpath. You heard Sir Arthur say that Root was the life and soul of the party that morning, and took the lead in all their goings-on. Why, what's the matter, Von Hoffmann?"

The German had sprung up, and his eyes were blazing. "That's it," he cried; "he took the lead in everything. That's it. Of course. I ought to have spotted everything from that one remark. What did they do that he took the lead in?"

"Keep calm, old boy," replied Fleming. "I

don't know what it was that he took the lead in, but I can easily find out."

"No. I know what it was. We've been told. They all bathed. But the real problem is, did they all bathe? Or did they all bathe except one of them? If it's that, then I can explain the whole outside job." He rushed to the door, hurled it open, and dashed out, shouting loudly. "Hi! Someone. Quick. I want someone. Anyone will do."

"Will I do?" said Peter St. John politely from the depths of an easy chair in the hall.

Von Hoffmann only stopped long enough to exclaim. "No. You're the only one who won't," and collided with Leslie Brookes, who came out of the billiard room to see what the trouble was.

"Brookes," exclaimed Von Hoffmann. "This is tremendously urgent. Come into the library for a moment. Now, I want you to cast your mind back to last Saturday morning."

"Last Saturday. Yes."

"You all bathed?"

"Yes. That's right. We all bathed after breakfast."

"When you say 'all', whom do you mean?"

"Well, let me see. There was myself and Celia and Lavender—that's three. Old Marston and

Sir Arthur, five; and Harden, six; and Root, seven. Oh, no. We didn't all bathe. That secretary chap went off to work at his papers."

"Never mind him. He doesn't matter."

"Now, Mr. Brookes, who suggested bathing?"

"Who suggested it?" said Brookes, wrinkling his brow. "Well, I don't think anyone exactly suggested it. It was a hot day, and, so far as I can remember, it more or less suggested itself."

"Anyhow, you all bathed, all the seven you've named?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Brookes," Von Hoffmann said earnestly —and Fleming could see that his enormous and usually impassive friend was trembling with excitement—"Mr. Brookes, are you sure that you all bathed?"

"Yes, quite." The young man looked a little surprised at the other's earnestness over such an unimportant affair.

"You all actually went into the water?"

"No, by Jove, we didn't," cried Brookes, surprised now at the sudden emergence in his mind of a forgotten detail. "You're quite right. I don't know how you guessed it, Mr. Hoffmann, but old Root got into a bathing dress and then funked

it at the last moment. Said he was too old. And, by Jove, Mr. Hoffmann"—the young man was positively astounded at the reappearance in his memory of incidents that he had only a moment ago been positive had never taken place—"by Jove, Mr. Hoffmann, it all comes back to me. I was surprised at old Root funking it at the last moment, because it was old Root who was so keen on bathing from the very beginning."

Von Hoffmann gave a loud crow of delight, and rubbed his hands ecstatically. "Marvellous. Wonderful," he cried. "My dear Mr. Brookes, you've put new life into me. And, incidentally, you can run and tell that girl of yours that I know, and Herr Fleming knows, who killed Mr. Florian Root, and we know that it wasn't you."

"Did you ever think for a moment it was?" began Leslie Brookes indignantly, but the German laid a huge hand on his chest and pushed him blandly out of the room, saying at the same time, "Run along, run along, and be a good boy in future."

"And now," he cried to Fleming, "let me tell you the true story of the stone rabbits."

"Half a moment," said Fleming, "before you begin. If you're so cocksure about that lad's innocence, do you know who did kill Florian Root?"

"Yes. I do."

"Who was it?"

"Florian Root."

"Suicide?" exclaimed Fleming. "Rats!"

He was about to say something stronger when Sergeant Maitland entered.

"Message from headquarters, sir," he said.

"Well?"

The sergeant handed a dispatch to the inspector, who read it aloud.

"*Ferrovia's* captain wirelesses that he has opened Singapore parcel bags and found parcel with Crowmarsh Gifford postmark. Parcel contains a signed photograph of Lavender Arlington."

"Ha! ha!" There was a tremendous roar as Von Hoffmann began to laugh, and he laughed for at least a minute.

CHAPTER XV

PURE REASON AT WORK

"Stop making a noise like a jackass, you oversized Prussian sweep," exclaimed Fleming, amusement mingling with irritation. "There's absolutely nothing to laugh at. Shut up, curse you! All right, Maitland," he added hastily. "Tell Inspector—Inspector Williams—that I would like to see him as soon as possible. That's all. Now, you cocksure Brandenburger, out with it. What's up?"

The German stopped laughing, and began with assumed dignity, "I am only here as an observer, Inspector Fleming——"

"And you'll jolly soon be chucked out of that window, Inspector von Hoffmann, if you don't tell me what you're driving at."

Von Hoffmann sat down, threw away his cigar end, and said seriously, "Fleming, I have a theory, a new theory, which fits all the facts of what we've been calling the 'outside job.' It fits all the facts."

"Including the rabbit?"

"Including the rabbit. I might almost say, 'Based upon the rabbit.'"

"Go ahead," said Fleming briefly. He had sufficient acquaintance with the redoubtable chief of the Berlin police to know that when he was serious he was very serious, and that anything he said was worth listening to.

"I'll tell you the story of what happened—of what I think happened—on that Friday night——"

"On that Saturday night, you mean," put in Fleming, knocking out his pipe.

"On that Friday night," continued the German, unmoved by the interruption, and the other man stared.

"On that night, Kauskas and St. John quarrelled. St. John rushed up to London to get an alibi. Kauskas came here to spy out the land. He ran into Harden. Whatever passed between them, the upshot of it was that Harden killed him."

"Rot!" exclaimed the Scotsman. Von Hoffmann pulled his watch out of his pocket and examined it carefully. "Yes," he murmured, "if I start now in a good car, I get to Croydon in time to catch the Paris air mail, and I shall be in Berlin to-morrow."

"All right, all right," grumbled Fleming. "I won't interrupt again."

"I should hope not," said the other severely. "Now, then, where had I got to?"

"You had just got to the killing on Friday night of a man who left Newhaven on Saturday evening."

"Oh, yes. Harden killed Kauskas—or perhaps Harden and Root together killed him. That I don't know. Anyway, Root arrived before the body was put away. Root is a clever man, Harden a blundering, romantic, Herculean ass. Root, I imagine, offered to conceal the body. Harden accepts. Now then—listen. Root is a secret exploiter of Baltanian wealth. He knows—or, at any rate, I am assuming that he knows—that the famous Sons of Liberty are after him. Sooner or later they'll get him. So he plans a double dodge. He sees at once that both he and Kauskas are, roughly, the same build and colouring. That gives him his chance. He takes off Kauskas's clothes and dresses the body in his own. Every button right, every stud and link in place; I tell you that that fellow had a nerve! The doddering, absent-minded picture collector! Then he wanted a weight to tie to the body. Any weight would do in an ordinary case. The most inconspicuous

stone would be best. Root chose one of the stone rabbits, the most conspicuous thing he could find. But he had to take it. He had no choice but to take it."

"Why?" ejaculated Fleming.

"Because there were two of them," was the cryptic answer. "He first of all smashed in the poor devil's face, probably with the rabbit itself —the river would wash away the traces—and then he tied it to the stone, rowed out, and slung it overboard. All this, remember, was on Friday night." He paused to fill a glass from a decanter of whisky and a syphon which stood handy, and then went on:

"The next thing he did was to go back to bed. Next morning he was ready. He insisted on every one bathing. He insisted on bathing himself."

"But he didn't bathe," objected Fleming.

"I ought to have said," Von Hoffmann corrected himself, "he insisted on putting on a bathing costume. Why? I ask you why. I ask myself why. And there is only one answer. In order to show six separate independent witnesses what none of those six independent witnesses had ever known before—not even his oldest and best friend." Von Hoffmann lowered his voice im-

pressively. "That he was one of the Sons of Liberty. That he had the famous indelible circle and dot upon his upper arm. But he did not bathe. He changed his mind at the last moment. As our young friend put it, 'he funked it at the last moment.' Again I ask you why. Again I ask myself why. And again there is only one answer. Because he did not want those six independent witnesses to see the famous indelible circle and dot of the Sons of Liberty vanish under the beneficent influence of the water of your ancient Thames."

Fleming started as if he had been shot. "By thunder, Von Hoffmann!" was all he said.

"That accounts for the amazing coincidence that Waldingham only discovered on last Saturday that his lifelong friend was an old Son of Liberty. He wasn't. Root then went to his room, made his new will, sent it off to his solicitor, and slipped away in the clothes of the unfortunate Kauskas. He crossed from Newhaven to Dieppe, and took good care that the passport officer remembered his name and and even a certain amount of his appearance. On the Sunday he doubled back to England—I should imagine as Stephen Harrison." Von Hoffmann took a

long pull at his whisky-and-soda, and went on: "Now, my friend, for the second part of this little history I have got to assume a thing which at the moment I can't prove. I have got to assume that Root also had a very good reason for wanting Harden out of the way."

"We've just heard from Norman," interposed Fleming, "that the bulk of Root's fortune was invested in Baltania. It's possible that, in the event of Harden's revolution proving successful, he would have lost a lot of it."

"Probably that's it," assented the other. "Anyhow, if my story is the true version of the outside job, there must be some motive of that sort. If Root did not return on Sunday, then my story is all moonshine."

"Go on," said Fleming.

"Very well. Root returned late on Sunday night. I should say he was wearing another suit by this time, but that he had on Kauskas's boots, in case he left any footprints. He came to kill Harden. But he wanted to make quite certain that he himself was not suspected. You see, on the Monday morning the police would find that Harden was murdered and Root missing. They might easily be silly enough to start a hue and cry after him. Therefore the police had to be

shown that Root couldn't possibly have killed Harden, because Root himself had been dead for the last twenty-four hours. So he brought down those chains and tied them on to the second rabbit, and lugged the rabbit into a prominent position for us all to see. That is what I meant when I said there had to be two of them. He meant us to say—and, of course, we did say after a little—'Hullo, here's one of the rabbits. Where's the other?' An ordinary stone wouldn't have done. We would simply have said, 'Hullo, here's a stone,' and nothing more. But, once we had got to the absence of the second rabbit, it was simply a question of hours before we dragged the river and found the body of Root. And therefore Root could not possibly have killed Harden on the Sunday night, because the doctors would say that he had been in the river for at least twenty-four hours."

Von Hoffmann stopped and looked at Fleming.

"Well," said the latter, "go on."

"That's as far as my story goes. That's the end of the outside job. After he had left the rabbit on the lawn he went inside."

The Scotland Yard man looked with admiration at the German. "Well, I always did say you had a certain amount of crude intelligence," he

said, "and your guesswork certainly covers all those facts."

"Guesswork," said Von Hoffmann indignantly. "It was the work of pure reason."

"Well, turn your pure reason on to the indoors problem for a bit."

The German spread out his hands. "Look what I've done," he exclaimed. "I've not only explained all the events surrounding the murder by the boat house, but I've provided a connecting link between the two sets of events which we thought were entirely separate. Look! The moment Root enters the house in the pointed, patent-leather boots of Kauskas, the two sets of events become one. We have the entry into the house of a man who is already a murderer or an accomplice, a man with a motive, presumably, for killing Harden, and a man who was perfectly acquainted with the ways of the household, with the lie of the land, and with the handwriting of his niece."

"Let's put it like this," said Fleming. "If Florian Root didn't kill Harden, he probably knows who did, and, in any case, he has a good deal to explain."

"You're a cautious old Scotsman," said Von

Hoffmann. "I should say that he has got a good deal to explain."

That night the vast and far-reaching machinery of Scotland Yard was set in motion for the discovery of Florian Root and Stephen Harrison, or Florian Root *alias* Stephen Harrison.

CHAPTER XVI

MR. ST. JOHN AT PLAY

Peter Petrovich St. John was enjoying himself at Westbrook House. He was living in a luxurious establishment where the food, drinks, and cigars were all admirable, he had nothing to do, and he not only had no desire to leave, but was actually forbidden to do so by the majesty of the English Law. As a general rule, in his past life, wherever Peter St. John had found himself comfortably and luxuriously situated, some urgent and pressing reason had cropped up for his immediate expulsion into the outer darkness, and it was very seldom that he had been so fortunately placed as at Westbrook. However much he annoyed his fellow-guests, however outrageously he criticized the arrangements for his comfort, however selfishly he monopolized easy chairs, morning papers, or dinner conversation, there was no way of getting rid of him. And Peter St. John knew it, and enjoyed himself.

There were times when his conversation was

appreciated. He had a lively tongue and a highly flavoured stock of reminiscence. But he also had an irritating trick of using his lively tongue to select subjects for talk which he knew would be unpalatable to his listeners. For example, he would single out Lavender Arlington for discussions on the inferiority of the English musical comedy stage to the German, or Polish, or Brazilian, or any other nation that happened to come into his head. Lavender Arlington was accustomed to being singled out for conversation by men, young, middle-aged, or old, but not exactly in the style of Peter St. John. And she did not like it. The more she showed her resentment, the more delighted he became, and the more dangerously he skirted round awkward, if not positively insulting, topics.

He also found that Leslie Brookes was an easy target, by attacking the English public school system, by suggesting that the British navy was definitely inferior to the German navy in the war, and by roundly asserting that Nelson was one of the most incompetent men who ever wore the King's uniform. This last topic greatly distressed Sir Arthur, particularly as St. John supported his assertions by a number of totally fictitious anecdotes and stories which he invented

and amplified as he went on, and Sir Arthur was not sufficiently well up in the details of the subject to be able to refute them.

With Celia, St. John found that the most effective way of making himself unpopular was to pretend to be violently in love with her, and to woo her with an exaggerated old-world courtesy and floridity of phrase.

The result of his conversational efforts was to unite the members of the house party into some semblance of friendliness towards each other. They found themselves drifting rapidly into a Mutual Defense Society, and they would have admitted, if they had been pressed to an admission, that the task of avoiding St. John and warding off his intolerable intimacy and affability made the dreamy days pass more quickly. Von Hoffmann very quickly noticed the change in the atmosphere and could not help admiring St. John's self-confidence and audacity, as well as his obvious alertness and readiness for an emergency. For the German had no doubt that St. John was prepared at any moment for some crisis. What that crisis might be, or from what direction it might arise, there was no indication. But he noticed that the Anglo-Baltanian never went very near the river, or indeed, ever went

more than a few yards from the house. When he did venture on to the lawn, he always sat or stood facing the river, unless he was in the company of someone who was already facing in that direction. When he was indoors he was not so vigilant, but, even in his most casual and lighthearted moods, he never entirely lost the look of a cat that dozes with one eye open and a complete equipment of claws ready and sharpened.

It might be a habitual caution and vigilance, reflected Von Hoffmann, born of years of independence and loneliness on the Continent of Europe. It might be the ordinary alertness of the adventurer, the rolling stone, in which case it would have nothing to do with the present situation. Or it might be a special vigilance, exercised on this special occasion to meet some special emergency, in which case it might turn out to be interesting. Although, the detective argued, there didn't seem any reason why any fresh personality should intrude itself into the drama. Presumably the headquarters of the Sons of Liberty would be under the impression that their orders had been faithfully carried out—more than that, had been actually improved upon in that not only Harden, but also Root, had been, apparently, exterminated. Even if St.

John had orders to proceed home at once to report, they could not possibly know by this time that he had not done so, and, indeed, they would be bound to assume that he had been detained by the police. It did not seem likely, therefore, that St. John could be apprehending the arrival of one of his Baltanian colleagues. It was much more likely that Harden had friends, admirers, worshippers, who would leave no stone unturned until they had hunted down the murderer of their idol. That was a distinct possibility, and St. John might well be alarmed at the prospect of being mistaken for the quarry by that type of pursuer. That would also account for St. John's anxiety to be arrested in order to get publicity for his perfect alibi. "He might well be regretting," thought the German, "that he let out the details of that alibi so early on in the proceedings. I suppose he couldn't resist scoring over us."

But, whatever the reason, there could be no doubt at all that Peter St. John, for all his banter, his impudence, his occasional downright impertinence, was all the time keeping his weather-eye open, and his trigger finger ready, for something or someone that he expected to come upon him from outside. His relations with the silent

Ellenberger could easily be deduced from the ecstasies of fury and rage into which a casual phrase or sentence in Baltanian could throw the blond secretary.

On at least two occasions the detectives were brought sharply into contact with the astuteness of the adventurer. The first was at dinner on the Thursday night after the murder of Harden. The detectives had settled down more or less into the house routine of meals, although they invariably left the table as soon as the business part of each meal was over. Their presence had the effect of completely tying the tongue of their already half-tongue-tied host, and of embarrassing to a certain extent Celia and Leslie Brookes. Lavender Arlington was rather ostentatiously at ease on these occasions, while St. John was by nature incapable of losing a jot of his affability and aplomb.

When the fish came in on the Thursday evening, Peter St. John seized a lull in the conversation to say across the table to the actress, "I suppose you have thousands of adorers all over the world, Miss Arlington."

Lavender Arlington suspected a trap, and was on the point of answering rather tartly, but, remembering her manners, she smiled sweetly

and replied: "Not adorers, Mr. St. John. I'm afraid."

"Admirers, then."

"Nor even admirers."

"Oh, come," he cried, "don't ask me to believe that. I can picture them in every hemisphere—can't you, Sir Arthur —sitting by campfires and living on dried *khidmutgar* and wearing nothing but a ragged biltong, or perhaps a sjambok, but dreaming all the time of the dear old Gaiety chorus and Lavender's high kick."

There was an appreciative titter at this from Leslie Brookes, and St. John wheeled on him in a flash. "You know what I mean, don't you, Brookes? You'll find them in every jungle, having a tub in every river from Pernambuco to Tasmania, brown as berries, crooked as sin, and every one of them chaps who've been sacked from Winchester. 'Manners makyth man,' I've no doubt, but I bet they make jolly rotten emigrants."

"Oh, dry up, St. John," said Brookes, partly annoyed at the flippancy and partly annoyed with himself for not being able to think of a suitable retort. But St. John was getting into his stride.

"It must be a great consolation to you to know that I have it from the very best, the very highest authority on the subject, that each one of those poor, wandering exiles, before he turns in for the night and just after kissing Lavender's photograph and saying his prayers, wraps himself up in the dear old Union Jack, the symbol of empire, the flag we all love. And it's a curious fact of natural history, Miss Waldingham, a fact that is highly gratifying to our patriotic instincts, that no flea, bug, bee, wasp, or mosquito, however large, however venomous, however persevering, has yet been discovered with sufficient nerve to attempt to bite through a Union Jack. Odd, isn't it? But quite true, I'm told. Now, Lavender, I want you to tell us all about the poor dear fellow in Singapore."

"In Singapore?" she answered. "I don't know anyone there."

No one noticed the absolute rigidity and rapt attention of the two inspectors. Fleming looked as if he had been turned into stone with a mouthful of fish half way to his lips; Von Hoffmann's huge hand had closed over his piece of bread, and was gripping it tightly.

"Oh, I say," said the irrepressible St. John. "Is it as secret as all that? Is it a real romance?

Have two young hearts throbbed for each other across the weary waste of years? Well, all I can say is, perhaps I'd better not say anything more about it"; and, with a slight jerk of his head towards the ceiling and a look of pained virtue, he succeeded in conveying the impression that he disapproved of the actress for having a friend in Singapore while Harden had so recently been murdered.

Lavender Arlington looked daggers at him but he was apparently unconscious of her fury, and went on sadly, "Sending him photographs too. Tut, tut!" Fleming's fork dropped with a crash on to his plate, and everyone turned at the noise. Sir Arthur looked thoroughly uncomfortable, and there was an awkward silence, broken by Von Hoffmann's deep voice. "We'd better have this out now. There's no good everyone feeling miserable and embarrassed."

St. John looked at him with a face of round innocence and eyes opened wide. "Miserable and embarrassed? But I assure you, my dear Herr Detective-Inspector, that I am not in the least miserable and embarrassed."

Von Hoffmann swept him away with a wave of his arm and addressed the actress.

"Miss Arlington, you did send a photograph

of yourself to Singapore on Monday morning from Crowmarsh Gifford. We know that." She shrugged her shoulders. "And we also know—or we think we know—why you did. But what we don't know is how Mr. St. John discovered it. Do you?"

"No," she replied, with a vicious snap, "but I'd back him to find out anything. He's that sort."

"You didn't tell him?"

"I wouldn't tell him anything except a thing I wanted spread round and garbled and exaggerated—that and what I think of him. Nothing else."

"Then, Mr. St. John, I think the next word lies with you."

Peter St. John gazed at the ceiling. "Yes, I found it out in rather a singular way," he said dreamily.

"How?" snapped Fleming impatiently, and St. John lowered his gaze with an expression of mild reproach.

"How? By listening at the library door when your sergeant brought the message," he remarked blandly.

The detectives gazed at him in open-mouthed astonishment at his audacity.

Conversation was inclined to languish during the rest of dinner that night.

The second occasion on which the inspectors observed the Anglo-Baltanian's general desire to make mischief, and at the same time his shrewdness and alertness, was on the following morning. A number of reports and messages had arrived from headquarters, and Fleming was sitting at his desk wading through them.

They were mostly about Stephen Harrison, and the financial antecedents of that elusive gentleman and of Florian Root.

Suddenly the door was flung open and Lavender Arlington strode in. Her cheeks were scarlet and her brow was dark. She halted in front of the desk, and struck it a resounding blow with her white but powerful fist.

"All right, Mr. Policeman," she cried, "I haven't played fair, and I know it. But I'll play fair now. I did put that bottle of dope into that cad St. John's suitcase. I only did it to spite him, the little dirty swine. Ferdinand gave it to me on Sunday night. It was the last thing he ever gave me. I hadn't been sleeping well, and he gave it to me."

Fleming opened his eyes. "My dear Miss Arlington, why didn't you tell me before?"

"It didn't seem to have anything to do with his murder that he gave me a present of a sleeping draught the night before."

"No," said the detective thoughtfully, "that's true. But still, you ought to have told me. Did you take a draught that night?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I knew I'd sleep after that row I'd had with Ferdinand in the library—I always sleep after a row."

"And you put the bottle into St. John's suitcase to bring suspicion on him?"

"No, not exactly."

"To get rid of it, then?"

"Certainly not. It was just—just to make trouble for that little beast. I was sorry afterwards that I'd done it. It was damned silly. But I was mad—half mad—I still am—about the whole thing."

"I quite see, Miss Arlington. Anyhow, thank you for coming to tell me now."

"As soon as I heard, I had to tell you. You must have thought me an awful skunk not to tell you everything I knew."

"As soon as you heard what?"

"That you'd found my fingerprint on the

bottle. I thought I'd been so careful," she added naïvely, "and wiped them all off."

Fleming got up and held open the library door for her.

"Thank you for coming, Miss Arlington. There's nothing else you'd like to tell me, is there?"

"Nothing."

"You're quite sure?"

"Quite."

Fleming sighed. "I shall find out in time, you know."

"What will you find out?"

"What you did on Monday morning between six and eight-thirty."

The actress met his gaze unflinchingly. "I've no idea what you're talking about."

"Very well," he answered quietly, "you can do as you like. But I've two bits of advice for you, Miss Arlington: one is to tell me everything you know, the other is——" He paused.

"Well, go on. What is the other?"

"The other is not to believe every word that St. John tells you. There were no fingerprints on the bottle." And he gently closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FATAL NIGHTGOWN

The search for Stephen Harrison was prosecuted with the usual energy and meticulous thoroughness of Scotland Yard, but it soon became clear that the tracks had been carefully covered. There was very little doubt in the minds of the authorities that such a person as Harrison actually existed. The first supposition that the name was simply an *alias* for Florian Root, and served to cover the double life led by that individual, had been dismissed. For it was obvious that Root had so organized his life as to make escape possible at any moment, and the machinery was all ready for transferring his money and property to Harrison. But, if he was compelled to effect his escape in circumstances that made it undesirable for him to return to life—in other words, if the police were after him—he would be unable to turn up as Stephen Harrison and claim the legacy. For naturally the police would be ready for him,

and would pounce upon him. Even with the most effective disguise, the risk would be too great. The authorities, therefore, argued that there did exist a real Stephen Harrison, a pawn, a tool, who would sooner or later claim the property, and hand it back to its carefully concealed owner. One method, then, of capturing Root would be to wait for the appearance of Harrison, and allow him to lead the pursuers to the quarry. But it was realized that this might be a slow and laborious business, and might even be ineffectual in the end. The active hunt for the two men was, therefore, set on foot, and maintained at full pressure.

In the meanwhile, something in the nature of a deadlock had set in at Westbrook House. Fleming was satisfied that Von Hoffmann's reconstruction of the series of events beginning with the arrival of Kauskas at the Half Moon Inn on the Friday afternoon, and ending with the entry of Florian Root, wearing the dead Baltanian's boots, into Westbrook House on the Sunday night, was correct. It covered all the facts, and was backed by a perfectly adequate motive. But the events from the moment of Root's entry into the house to the return of Lavender Arlington from her early morning drive

were still inexplicable, and it was as clear as daylight to Fleming that some, if not all, of the house party were concealing important information. The actress, for one, obviously was. She had quarrelled with Harden on the Sunday evening in the library, and she had refused to explain what the quarrel was about; she had also refused to explain her morning drive. Celia Waldingham had slept through the whole thing, even though it included either the fall of a big, heavy man at her very door or else his fall a few yards down the corridor and the subsequent dragging of his body along to her door, and the possible—indeed, probable—rattling of the handle. She said she had been doped, but no trace of dope had been found in her orangeade.

Then there was Ellenberger. He also had slept through it all, and said he had been doped, and again no trace of dope had been found in the glass from which he drank his evening beer.

Leslie Brookes had a good enough motive for killing the man, and as much opportunity as anyone else. But Fleming felt a vague idea that it was all wrong for a man like Brookes to stab a man in the back. Somehow it didn't fit. But at the same time he was bound to admit, he reflected, that human nature is an odd thing, and

that one of the best and straightest and pleasantest men he had ever known had, without any shadow of doubt, strangled an old aunt from whom he had expectations. Brookes might have gone suddenly mad with rage on seeing the foreign Lothario with his fingers actually on the handle of Celia Waldingham's door.

But the real difficulty that Fleming came back to every time was the existence of the two notes in the different handwriting and the same wording, one with initials and one without. That was the question that drummed away at his mind all the time. He felt that if he could answer it he would have all the threads in his hands, that all the other questions would answer themselves.

The writer of one of them had known Celia's handwriting and had tried to copy it, and had had ample opportunities for practising. That meant someone who had had access to writings of hers. That meant, Fleming admitted to himself, practically anyone who had ever stayed for an hour in the house and had seized a chance of pocketing a specimen. But the actual writing of the note, and the delivery of it to Harden, surely pointed to someone inside the house. That confined it to Sir Arthur himself, Brookes, Celia, Lavender Arlington, Ellenberger, and Marston.

He ruled out the first and last names, and then he whistled and looked at the ceiling. It was on the Saturday after the murder that he was making his fiftieth attack upon the problem of the two notes. The cause of his whistle and his sudden gaze upward was occasioned by a new idea. Sir Arthur and Florian had been old friends, practically brought up together, and, later on, brothers-in-law as well. Suppose Florian Root had returned from France on the Sunday, had gone quietly down to Westbrook, had entered unobserved, and gone straight to Sir Arthur and asked to be concealed for twelve or fifteen hours? Sir Arthur would not have hesitated for a moment, and probably would have asked no questions. Then Root would have been able to carry on the remainder of his task from inside the house—an enormous advantage. Instead of having to break in from the outside, he would be able to organize his attack on Harden from the heart of the citadel. He would be able to write that note which looked like Celia's writing—Fleming suddenly struck the table a blow with his fist—and exclaimed aloud, "He did write it. What an ass I am!"

He seized the now enormous bundle of documents and reports about the case which lay on

his desk, and rapidly turned them over until he came to the report of the handwriting expert. "Studied the writing," he muttered, "practised imitating it—family resemblance—not unlike the writing of Sir Arthur—— That's it, of course," he went on, closing the report and replacing it in the pile. "Family resemblance. Root was her uncle. That accounts for it. Of course. Now we almost begin to move."

If Root was concealed in the house on Sunday, and killed Harden and then slipped away again, of course Sir Arthur would be bound to guess that he had a hand in it.

"But half a moment," said Fleming, speaking aloud again, "half a moment; would he be bound to guess that?" And then, remembering Peter St. John's knack of listening at keyholes, he decided not to think aloud unless he was sure that a constable was on duty at the door.

For if Sir Arthur, he reflected, thought Root was a blue-eyed, harmless old art collector, and had thought so for the last thirty years, he certainly would not dream of associating him with a cruel and cold-blooded murder. He would think there was nothing at all odd in his friend's behaviour. Assume, then, that Root had returned and concealed himself, or had been concealed by

Sir Arthur, there was at least a chance that some trace of his visit would have been left. Some box room, some disused attic, some out-of-the-way, unsuspected corner of the large house, might easily contain signs of having been used as a hiding place. "He might be there still," thought Fleming, and then he reflected that that would be throwing rather too great a strain on the credulity even of so credulous a person as the baronet. He determined, at any rate, to institute a thorough search of the nooks and crannies of the house. If nothing was found, it would in no way alter the theory that Root might have been concealed for a night. Sir Arthur had had a week in which to remove the traces. If, on the other hand, evidence of the occupation was discovered, it would confirm Fleming in his belief that Florian Root had returned and committed the murder from inside the house. The existence of the two notes and the mysterious motor drive of the actress would not be explained, it was true, but Fleming felt that this was one of those cases where it pays to go straight for the murderer, and not to be put off by apparently inexplicable but really trivial details. Over-subtlety had its dangers. At the same time, Fleming was too old a bird, and too cautious by national char-

acter, to put all his eggs in one basket. He thought that the conduct of Root needed explanation, and that the probable explanation was that he was the murderer of Harden, but at the same time he could not help admitting that the conduct of Lavender Arlington also needed explanation. The widespread investigation that was being conducted into her motor drive was still being prosecuted with the utmost vigour, and at any moment might bring to light a piece of evidence that would mean her instant arrest. The detectives had made up their minds that she undoubtedly had had something which she desperately wanted to hide. If it was an article of clothing that was stained with blood, her arrest and conviction on circumstantial evidence would almost certainly follow. In which case, of course, the position of Root would be materially altered. But somehow Fleming could not bring himself to believe that the actress, proud, passionate, and violent as she was, really killed the man she had loved for so many years. And yet who else but a wildly passionate and jealous woman would stab a man seven times? He remembered a play on the London stage in which a jealous woman shoots her lover, and fires at him six times at point-blank range. It was the

same sort of thing. Suppose Lavender Arlington had sent the note—one of them—to Harden, and had stabbed him from behind in the corridor? Root might then have come along later on the same errand, stepped in the pool of blood, and bolted in a panic.

"One more link," cried Fleming, forgetting the possibility that St. John might be eavesdropping, "one more link in either chain. That's all I want."

But if that link was not forthcoming, if that link did not exist, what then? The Scottish detective picked up his list of people who had been in the house. If the actress and Florian Root both slipped through the meshes, it left only Celia Waldingham, Leslie Brookes, and Ellenberger. After a moment Fleming ruled out Celia. "Damn it all," he said to himself, "there are limits to everything, and I don't believe that girl could have done it. You've only got to look at her."

That left Brookes and Ellenberger. The former had a motive, but that was all. The latter—well, the latter might be a spy of the anti-Hardenites. You never could tell with these foreigners. But there wasn't a shadow of proof against him, and the Baltanian legation in London and the chief of police in Baltania had emphasized his life-

long devotion to the cause and person of his dead master. Brookes was a possibility; Ellenberger not even a possibility.

He had got as far as that when Von Hoffmann came in. He wore an expression of profound gloom on his usually jovial countenance, and he had no smile or even word for his colleague. Fleming looked at him in surprise. He had never seen him appear so depressed and downcast.

"What's up?" he exclaimed, and the other merely shrugged his shoulders and walked across to the window, where he stood gazing out towards the river.

"What are you working on?" the German said at last, in a dull and heavy tone.

"Just going over the inside people again. Von Hoffmann, I can't believe it was young Brookes, and that whittles it down to a choice between the actress and Root. There is a perfectly good case against either of them except for the absence of one vital link in each. Motive, opportunity, method, it's all there except a proof that either of them was concerned with the actual killing."

The German did not turn round, but answered in a low voice, "You've got your link. Sergeant Maitland has got it."

"What!" exclaimed Fleming, but the other did

not repeat his words. Instead, he muttered, "I hate and loathe these cases. Thank God it isn't one of mine in Germany. There's a lot to be said for the French and their methods."

"It's the Arlington woman, I suppose," said Fleming, and Von Hoffmann nodded.

There was a knock, and Sergeant Maitland entered.

"Message from London, sir; the guard of a train has been found, sir, who was handed a parcel to post by a woman last Monday morning, sir, at Mitcham station. She gave him two pounds, and asked him to say nothing about it. He posted the parcel, but remembered the address. The parcel has been found, and it contains a blood-stained silk nightdress."

CHAPTER XVIII

"ALL MEN KILL THE THING THEY LOVE"

THAT night the last editions of the evening papers contained the news in their stop press columns and on their posters. The newsboys bawled themselves hoarse in the neighbourhood of Shaftesbury Avenue and the Strand.

The air rang with raucous cires of, "Westbrook murders; arrest of Lavender Arlington," resounding high above the roar and bustle of the after-theatre traffic. The sensation was immense. The name and fame of the actress were known all over the English-speaking world. Why, a full-length, life-size poster of her was at the very moment plastered on the Gaiety hoardings, coupled with an announcement that the musical comedy then running was shortly to be withdrawn, and would be succeeded by *The Daffodil Girl*, in which Miss Lavender Arlington was to play the leading part.

A crowd of several hundred people gathered outside the Gaiety, and stared at the darkened

buildings and the row of posters as if they expected to see the lady herself emerge from the stage door, handcuffed between two detectives. The arrest was the only topic of conversation on buses and in trains as the theatre-goers scattered to their homes.

On the next morning, the Sunday, Inspector Fleming packed his belongings and his documents, lifted the embargo on the movements of the occupants of the house, and returned to Scotland Yard, leaving a plain-clothes man at the Half Moon to watch the house in case Root came back.

The search for Root was continued by the Scotland Yard machine, and Fleming was detailed to investigate the loss of a pearl necklace which had vanished in suspicious circumstances from a flat in Cromwell Road. His attempt to extract information from Lavender Arlington had proved a complete failure. She resolutely declined to say a word.

It was not until about eight o'clock on Sunday evening that the inspector returned to his house at Highgate, after a laborious examination of the inarticulate and excited housemaids of the Cromwell Road flat which only resulted in a very small measure of success and a very large meas-

ure of hysteria. He had just finished his supper, and was pulling his pipe out of his pocket, when a loud jangling of the front doorbell and a thunderous tattoo on the knocker extracted a heavy groan from him. But what had sounded like an urgent summons turned out to be only a farewell visit from Von Hoffmann.

"Off to-morrow, my boy," he exclaimed. "Where's the beer?"

A large tankard having been filled for him, he sat down and lit a cigar. "Yes, off home to-morrow. Back to the grindstone after my little holiday."

"It was rather a busman's holiday," said Fleming, "but I hope you enjoyed it."

"I enjoyed it all till the very end," returned the other, "but I do loathe murders done by women. It's so unnatural. I've forgotten, by the way; do you hang them over here?"

"It has been done once recently, in a case down at Ilford, but it's very rare."

"That's good," said Von Hoffmann. "It's bad enough as it is to think of that—that gaudy, brilliant creature behind stone walls for most of the rest of her life."

There was a pause in the conversation, and then the German said:

"I think I'll run over for the trial, if I can borrow an aeroplane and business isn't too heavy. Has she said anything?"

"Not a word. Defence reserved. She'll have the biggest lawyers in the country."

"You know, Fleming," said Von Hoffmann, "there's something fishy about the whole case."

Rather to his surprise, the Scotsman agreed with him.

"You feel that about it? So do I."

"What makes you feel like that?"

"I don't know. No reason. What about you?"

"I don't know either. It's just an instinct. I feel it in my bones. Look here, Fleming, I suppose there's no doubt she did do it?"

"I don't see how there can be. The nightgown was unquestionably hers, and it's unquestionably stained with blood. How else can you account for that?"

"I can't. Frankly, I can't account for it in any other way. She must have done it. And yet——" The Berlin detective frowned, and snapped his fingers like a man who is trying to remember something that is only just eluding his memory.

"What is it?" asked Fleming.

"Again, I don't know. But there's been a phrase or a remark made by someone that is all

wrong. and I can't place it. I know perfectly well that it was a jarring phrase, and couldn't be true —true psychologically, I mean—and yet I can't think what it was."

"How do you mean, it couldn't be true psychologically?"

"Well, if someone came to me and said he'd seen you lying blind drunk under a table in the Criterion Bar, I should take a taxi down to give you a hand. It would be unlikely that you would be blind drunk, but it would be perfectly possible."

"Thank you very much," said the other drily.

"But if someone came to me and said he had irrefutable evidence that you had lived for many years by blackmailing an invalid grandmother, I should know by instinct that it was untrue, because you aren't that sort of man."

"Thank you very much again," said Fleming.

"You see what I mean. There are some things that can't be true, however strong the evidence may be. They just can't be, because if they were it would mean that black really was white after all, or that the sun really does go round the earth."

"And you think that the Arlington's guilt is one of these things?"

"Oh, dear me, no. I don't mean that at all. I never saw anyone in my life that I thought was more likely to kill a former lover. Oh, no. That fits beautifully into the picture. And, of course, it accounts perfectly for the seven stabs. She's a wild, passionate creature, and she saw red after the first stab and just went on. Couldn't help herself. I've known several cases like that, and I expect you have too."

"Then I don't see what's troubling you. According to your ideas, everything fits perfectly into the picture except something or other which you can't remember."

"Put like that, I know it sounds silly," conceded Von Hoffmann, "but, all the same——" He broke off, and stared gloomily at the fireplace. "Well, I must be going. I've got to pack my bag, go and shake hands with your commissioner, drop in on the embassy in Carlton House Terrace, and so home."

"*Auf wiedersehen*, old chap," said Fleming. "It's been great fun seeing you again, and mind you come over for the trial if you can."

"*Auf wiedersehen*, and the best of luck," replied his friend, "and come to Berlin in the autumn for a holiday. And I'll drop you a line if I can remember that thing that's all wrong."

The next few days were busy ones for Fleming. He had to prepare the case for the prosecution, marshal his evidence, and select his witnesses.

Sir Arthur Waldingham and his beautiful daughter were unable to leave for their trip to South Africa, greatly to the disappointment of Sir Arthur and the unconcealed delight of Leslie Brookes. Celia herself had become less anxious to go abroad now that she had got away from Westbrook. A few minutes after the official permission to leave had been granted, the house-party had broken up, and Sir Arthur and Celia had motored straight up to their London house in Eaton Square. Once out of the atmosphere of that fatal house and garden by the river, Celia's spirits began to recover, and in a few days she had returned to her own usual cheerfulness. Leslie Brookes grew proportionately more buoyant, and accepted with unbounded enthusiasm and alacrity a tentative suggestion of the baronet's that he should spend the next few days with them. The baronet himself seemed to have aged ten years under the strain of the last week. There are few creatures in the world who live so completely in a sheltered groove as an English country gentleman. The routine of years is seldom varied. Spring, summer, and autumn are spent

in the country, the winter in London. Gradually the groove deepens. The shelter overhead thickens and grows impenetrable. It takes the thunder of a war to reach, faintly and distantly, into that depth of seclusion. It takes a murder in the very house itself to startle the owner into a realization that there is a world all round him, and that he is not alone upon the planet with his cars and dogs and dependants.

Sir Arthur had been violently jolted. His quiet, dreamless, easy life had been horribly and repeatedly jarred. His shelter had been torn away; he himself had been dragged, blinking and timid, from his moss-lined groove into the glare of a sunshine that he had forgotten the very existence of. He hated and resented it all. He loathed the photographs in the newspapers of himself and his daughter and his house and his garden. Now there were photographs of his house in Eaton Square, and interviews with his car-washer and his butcher round the corner. And there were not only the past tragedies and the present publicity to worry and harass him; there was the hideous future, and all that it held in store for him in police-court proceedings, adjourned inquests, and finally the last act in the long-drawn melodrama, the witness box at the

Reading Assizes. There was something additionally horrible in the coincidence that Lavender Arlington was to be tried for killing the man she had loved in the very town where Wilde had written his ballad, containing the famous lines:

All men kill the thing they love

Sir Arthur hardly spoke now; even when addressed directly, his reply was always vague and irrelevant, and usually inaudible. He moved about the house like a shadow.

But even this rather depressing influence could not altogether damp the rising spirits of the young pair. Even the prospect of having to give evidence did not seem to worry them. Celia's delight in leaving Westbrook was so obviously intense that even Leslie Brookes glanced curiously at her once or twice during their first dinner at 24B Eaton Square, and afterwards, when the baronet had left them alone in the big drawing room overlooking the square, he remarked casually, "I never saw such a change in a human being in my life."

"Oh, it's the relief, the relief!" Celia cried, stretching her arms above her head. "You can't tell what a relief it is."

"Well, I'm jolly glad to get away from the place myself," returned the young man. "It was a bit gloomy, wasn't it?"

Celia looked at him, and then smiled maternally. "Yes, Leslie, it was a bit gloomy."

"And it certainly is a relief to get away. But I'd no idea it had got hold of you to such an extent as all that."

"Such an extent as all what?"

"Well, yesterday you were yelling and howling——"

"Oh, Leslie, I wasn't. How can you tell such stories?"

"Yes, you were. You were yelling and howling for the Zambesi River or some foul place like that, and to-day you seem perfectly happy and cheerful in Eaton Square, S. W. 1."

"Ah! Just think of all that's happened since then."

"I know poor Lavender Arlington's been arrested——"

"Yes, that's it."

"Oh, I say, Celia!" The young man was genuinely shocked. "You can't be grinning away like a Cheshire cat because that unfortunate girl's been arrested."

"Of course I'm not. And you're a beast to

think I would do such a thing. But, don't you see—don't you understand—that—that——"

"What?"

"Well, if Lavender did it, no one else could have?"

"I may not be very brilliant," replied Leslie Brookes with some warmth, "but even I can see that."

"Very well, then."

"What about it?"

"Leslie, dear," said Celia, "the truest thing you've said this evening were the words, 'I may not be very brilliant.' You aren't."

"I still don't see——"

"Oh, let's change the subject," said Celia a little impatiently. "Let's talk about something else."

"All right," replied Leslie promptly. "Let's talk about you"; and was rewarded with a dazzling smile.

"Leslie, darling, that's ever so much better. Do you know that no one has spoken a kind word to me since—since it all began? Not a really kind word."

"In that case," he returned lightly. "I'd better see what I can do. Let me see. I adore you. How will that do for a start?"

"It's a lovely start, Leslie. Go on." She nestled down among the sofa cushions.

"And I think you're the most beautiful person in the whole wide world."

"I do think you're nice, Leslie. I do really."

"How nice do you think me, Celia? Nice enough to—to——"

"May I come in?" said an easy and affable voice at the door, and Peter St. John strolled in.

"Damn and blast!" muttered Leslie, and Celia made matters worse by deliberately beaming at the newcomer.

"Why, it's Mr. St. John. Do come in and sit down. What are you doing in town?"

"Good evening, Miss Waldingham. Evening, Brookes. How are you?"

"Evening," muttered Leslie sullenly, and he turned away. Peter St. John grasped the significance of both tone and gesture, and smiled.

"I've only just dropped in," he said airily, "not for a long visit. Just a couple of hours or so."

"Oh! Just for a couple of hours! How nice!" said Leslie savagely.

"Yes, isn't it?" was the bland reply. "I was passing the door, so I looked in."

A maid entered with drinks on a tray, and St.

John helped himself to a whisky-and-soda without waiting to be asked. He was, as usual, perfectly at ease, and he strolled round the room, glass in hand, examining the pictures with the eye of a connoisseur.

"So they haven't got your uncle yet, Miss Waldingham?" he observed, as he stood in front of a small Matthew Maris.

Leslie snapped at him like a terrier, "Why can't you keep off that subject?"

"Matthew Maris is so much better than William, isn't he?" murmured St. John to himself; and then, as if Leslie's words had at last penetrated his absent-mindedness, he said, "What's that, old chap? I'm afraid I wasn't listening."

"Oh, nothing," said Brookes.

St. John returned from his critical peregrination and sat down beside Celia on the sofa. Brookes writhed with fury.

"What about poor old Lavender?" continued the Anglo-Baltanian conversationally. "I'm afraid she's rather in Queer Street; don't you think so, Miss Waldingham?"

Celia shivered. "It's too horrible to think of," she said in a low voice, and Brookes chimed in with the words, "And don't let's think about it."

St. John assumed a judicial air, and pretended

to consider this suggestion very carefully. "No," he said at last. "No, I can't agree with you there. I think you're being rather callous, Brookes."

"Callous!" exclaimed the indignant young man.

"Yes, callous. Consider. We've been staying together in one house for a week, more or less. We've all got to know each other and like each other. We had a charming time—charming house, charming garden, charming host, ten-thousandfold charming hostess, and then, at the end, one of the party is arrested for murder and haled off to prison, and you expect me not to think about it, to dismiss it from my mind. No," he added seriously, "no, I can't do that. You can't expect me to do that."

"I quite agree with Mr. St. John, Leslie," said Celia. "I think we've both been perfectly heartless about the whole thing ever since poor Lavender was arrested."

"Well, I'm damned!" said Brookes simply. He was too flabbergasted at the depth of feminine treachery to say more. He knew perfectly well that St. John was laughing up his sleeve, and he knew perfectly well that Celia thought he was being serious.

"Shall we be allowed to go and see her, do you think, Mr. St. John?" asked Celia. "I wish I could do something for her. Has she got money for lawyers and that sort of thing?"

"She's all right for lawyers," he answered. "I hear she's going to have old Smithson. She couldn't have a better man."

"Do you think—do you think——" began Celia, and then found that her throat had suddenly dried up and that the words would not form themselves.

"Do I think she'll be found guilty?" replied St. John. "Well, you know, she'll have a job to explain that nightgown."

"What nightgown?" asked the other two simultaneously. Interest and curiosity made Leslie Brookes forget his dignity.

"Why, the nightgown with the blood on it. Of course, I forgot you didn't know about it. Oh, yes, I'm full of news. It was like this. On that Monday morning when she went on that motor-drive, she went to Mitcham station and handed a parcel to the guard of a London train, gave him a couple of pounds, and asked him to post it in town. He was so surprised at the size of the tip, and perhaps at Lavender's smile, that he took particular care of the parcel, even to the

extent of remembering the address. Scotland Yard sought the address, and found that it didn't exist. They found the parcel at the G.P.O., in the lost packages department or whatever you call it. It contained one of the fair Lavender's nightgowns and it was all covered with blood."

"My God!" said Brookes under his breath, and Celia's face went pale. "How terrible! Poor girl!" she murmured.

"Devilish tricky thing to have to explain to Mr. Justice What's-his-name, the fellow who hangs them all," continued St. John cheerfully, and Celia shivered again.

"Well, I must be off," he went on. "I find I can't stay for two hours after all." He grinned at Brookes. "We'll all meet at the police court, I suppose, and then again at the assizes."

"Half a moment," said Leslie. "How did you find out all that about the nightgown?"

For the first time the good-looking face of the Anglo-Baltanian darkened. "I could kick myself," he said, "for not thinking of it before. It wasn't till Thursday evening that I got it fixed in."

"Got what fixed in?"

"A microphone in the library where the

German-Scottish alliance discussed the case. I got all Friday's and Saturday's news straight from the stable, so to speak, into my bedroom." He drained his glass, bowed, and strolled out.

CHAPTER XIX

THE THIRD RABBIT

In the course of the next week, Lavender Arlington was brought up before the magistrates in Reading police court. Her solicitor, one of the partners in one of the most famous firms of solicitors in the world, formally reserved her defence, and the actress was duly committed for trial at the next assizes. It was officially announced that Sir Hugh Smithson, K.C., was to lead for the defence, and it was freely rumoured that the attorney-general himself was going to lead for the crown. The excitement caused by the case was naturally immense. The Gaiety was crowded night after night for some inscrutable reason—perhaps because the public craved for a sight of the boards which Lavender Arlington had graced so often, and which possibly she would never grace again; perhaps for some obscure mass instinct of generosity by which the run of the dying musical comedy was to be prolonged until Miss Arlington should be free to

resume her interrupted rehearsals of *The Daffodil Girl*. The management had announced, with a gesture of superb chivalry, that the title rôle of the new piece would be played by Miss Arlington, and that no understudy would be engaged, a gesture which some thought quixotic. But its commercial results fully demonstrated the wisdom of the management in thinking that chivalry and quixotism, if rightly handled by a good publicity director, can be made to yield a very fair dividend. For the date of the first night was fixed for one week after the close of the Reading Assizes, and for the first fortnight of the run five guineas were asked, and instantly obtained, for a stall, and three guineas for a seat in the dress circle. The remainder of the house was sold out at proportionate rates. Such was the optimism of the management of *The Daffodil Girl*, and their faith in Lavender Arlington's innocence, or at any rate in the eloquence and ability of Sir Hugh Smithson, K.C.

The search for Florian Root had proved unavailing, and the authorities at Scotland Yard consulted Fleming on the advisability of continuing it. At a conference attended by the chief commissioner himself, the chief constable, and three of the famous superintendents, the inspec-

tor was invited to outline the case he would be able to present against Root in the event of his being discovered. The only charge possible would be that of being concerned, with or without Ferdinand Harden, in the murder of Kauskas. The passport officer on the Newhaven-Dieppe boat, who had remembered the name and general appearance of the man who was at the time bearing the name, flatly refused to swear to anyone's identity. His description was only a general one, and he positively declined to carry it an inch further, affirming repeatedly that if a mistake meant a man's life he didn't intend to make one.

There was the same trouble in getting other witnesses of any value. However much or however little Sir Arthur knew about the movements and actions of Root, it would probably be extremely difficult, if not entirely impossible, to extract information from him in a witness box. From what Fleming had seen of him, he imagined that his evidence would consist of a series of vague denials, which would be of no use to anyone except the accused.

It was decided, therefore, to drop the search and only to renew it if events proved that Lavender Arlington was innocent of the murder of

Harden—"a not very likely eventuality," as Fleming remarked drily to the conference.

The inspector went thoughtfully back to his office and issued the necessary orders for the discontinuance of the search, and then glanced once more through the papers which he had prepared for the prosecuting counsel. Everything was in order, and the case was complete. It was annoying, from an artistic point of view, that every detail was not clear and that every incident had not been explained. But murder cases, he reflected, are often like that. The murderer may be found, the chain of material evidence may be complete, the proof of guilt may be conclusive, and yet some small puzzling details remain permanently insoluble. In this case there were the duplicate notes, the hour of arrival of Root, and the uncertainty about the sleeping draughts. It was still not known who gave the sleeping draughts to whom. But these were minor points. It would have been more satisfactory to have cleared them up and make a clean, neatly rounded job of it, but, after all, in a murder case the important thing is to get the murderer. If it is a choice of solving the minor problems and laying hands on the guilty party, a

policeman cannot be expected to hesitate. The only danger in leaving loose ends sticking out is that it gives the defending counsel a chance of throwing doubt upon the rest of the evidence, and making great play with the lifetime of misery which lies in front of jurymen and jurywomen who send an innocent man, and still more an innocent woman, to the scaffold, or even to a long term of penal servitude. In this particular murder, and in preparing this particular brief for the crown, Fleming felt that he had to be especially careful because of the fame, the personality, and the beauty of the lady who would be in the dock. There would certainly be a tremendous amount of indirect play upon all this by the defence, and Fleming knew Smithson, K.C., of old. Smithson, K.C., would be in his element. He would miss nothing. He would tear any doubtful point to shreds, and, if the jury contained a few asses, he might easily go further, and convert one or two of the certainties into doubtful points. Smithson, K.C., was no joke, and it was as well to remember it when preparing a case.

But Fleming felt fairly confident. It would take more than the redoubtable lawyer to ex-

plain the blood on the nightdress, however much he might confuse the jury about the notes and the malevolent activities of the Sons of Liberty.

At this moment his telephone rang, and the operator at the central switchboard informed him that Berlin was just coming on the line, and the next moment he heard the hearty voice of the chief of the Berlin police.

"I say, Fleming," it said. "I've just remembered that point we spoke of—the thing that's all wrong psychologically. You know what I mean?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's this. You know that bottle of dope which belonged to Harden, and which Miss Arlington put into St. John's bag in order to spite him?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Very well. She said she got it from Harden, and she actually said"—he lowered his voice impressively, and emphasized every syllable—"she actually said, 'It was the last thing he ever gave me.'"

"Well, what about it?" asked Fleming.

"What about it? It can't be true. It's utterly impossible. It must be."

"You mean he gave her something else afterwards?"

"*Gott in Himmel!*" came a loud roar from the other end. "Here am I wasting good German marks on telephoning to a dunderheaded Scotch donkey. No, of course not. But, if it was the last thing he gave her, she wouldn't have thrown it away. She would have kept it and treasured it for the rest of her life. Any woman would. She might have killed her lover—I've no doubt she did—but I'll tell you one thing she didn't do. She didn't throw away his last present."

"I see," said Fleming thoughtfully. "It's an interesting point. But where does it lead us?"

"It leads you to this—that he didn't give it to her. She stole it from him."

"Well?"

"I say, this call is going to cost my poor country a fortune. I'll try and get it deducted from Reparations. She stole it from him to dope someone. Who? Why, Celia, of course. And why? Because Harden showed her the note making the assignation, and she was determined that Celia shouldn't be able to keep it. So she doped her. What about that?"

Fleming began to be rather impressed. "Go on," he said. "What next?"

"Oh, you can follow that up as well as I can. If she doped her, it was because she thought the note was genuine. If she thought it was genuine, she obviously didn't write it herself, and so on. I haven't time to go on with it. I'm up to the eyes in work here. They've been killing each other like flies over here while I've been away. So long. Let me know any developments"; and he rang off.

Fleming sat and stared at his blotting paper, and as he stared he became a little irritable. It was all very well for Von Hoffmann to ring up from Berlin and make a few casual guesses, and leave a whole new train of ideas, and then ring off again. He didn't have to work out the trains or verify the guesses. He just fired them off and left them. And, after all, what did they amount to? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Or, at any rate, practically nothing. And, in any case, Fleming didn't want any further help on the case. It was finished. It was completed. There only remained the routine formality of finding the prisoner guilty. So what was the point of bringing up new ideas based on guesswork? Because Von Hoffmann could say what he liked about psychological truths and untruths; the fact remained that all this stuff about the bottle of

sleeping draught was undoubtedly guesswork, and, as the case was complete, it was unnecessary guesswork.

All the same, it was an ingenious notion—just the sort of ingenious notion that the oversized Berliner might hit upon. Suppose, just for the sake of argument, that Harden had shown the note or notes to Lavender Arlington, and she had been determined to prevent the one o'clock rendezvous, what neater way could she hit upon than the dodge of slipping a whacking sleeping dose into Celia's orangeade? Somehow or other she knew that Harden had a bottle of the stuff, and she took it from his room. It would appeal to her dramatic sense to dope her rival with Harden's own dope. Then that, as Von Hoffmann had said, meant that someone else had written the note to Harden. Why not Celia herself? No, damn it, thought Fleming, not Celia. It was absurd to think of it. Then Root must have written it in order to decoy Harden out of his room at the appointed hour. Or Leslie Brookes—or——

"Well, what does it matter?" he muttered impatiently. "The case is complete."

He tried savagely to concentrate on the documents about a burglary in Park Lane which had just been sent up to him, but found his mind

coming back all the time to the Westbrook murders. At last he frankly gave it up and lay back in his chair.

"Of course," he murmured, "we have still got to prove that Root is alive; that is to say, if we want to prove that he's alive. I wonder what they'll do about that will of his." He gazed at the ceiling for a long time, and then he said, "Dash Von Hoffmann. What did he want to start these ideas for?"

If Lavender Arlington did not write the note making the assignation, then someone else must have, and whoever that someone else was must have known that there was at least a sporting chance that Harden would be in the corridor at one o'clock on the fatal morning. Presumably, if all the previous arguments and theories were correct, that someone must have been Root. It could not possibly have been anyone else. The evidence of the rabbits, if it had been correctly interpreted, coupled with the evidence of the blood-stained boots, made it as nearly certain as possible that Root had been in that corridor some time between the murder and about half-past two when the lorry went through Pangbourne. And, now that Von Hoffmann had suggested a possible solution of the question, "Who

doped Celia?" it was no longer necessary that Root should have been concealed in the house earlier in the evening in order to put the sleeping draught in the orangeade. He might easily have come in by the gunroom window, and gone straight up to the corridor and stepped in the pool of blood.

"Half a moment," ejaculated the inspector. "I'm getting confused. This was a perfectly clear case a few minutes ago, and now I'm getting tangled up again."

It didn't seem reasonable that Root should have taken elaborate precautions to convey a note somehow or other to Ferdinand Harden, making a rendezvous with him at one o'clock for the purpose of assassinating him, and should then have missed the rendezvous and arrived late. And yet he must have arrived late or he would have either killed Harden himself or else would have run into Lavender Arlington at her grim task. In the latter event he would be an important, a crucially important, witness.

But it was obvious that he would never admit to having been in Westbrook that night, and, naturally, the resulting reticence would considerably detract from his value in the witness box. In any case, was the inspector's final reflection,

as he got up and put on his hat, in any case, additional witnesses were really unnecessary.

His telephone bell rang again. This time it was a call from the constable on duty at the door.

"Dr. Pilling to see you, sir, from the Home Office."

"Dr. Pilling? Send him up," said Fleming, and a few moments later the famous Home Office analyst entered.

"I say, Fleming," he began at once eagerly, "that nightgown of yours—I don't mean your own one; I mean the one you sent round. The blood on it isn't human blood at all. It's a rabbit's, or something of that sort."

CHAPTER XX

THE LOVELY LAVENDER RELEASED

FLEMING's walking stick dropped from his fingers, fell against the desk, and slowly clattered to the floor. He made no effort to pick it up, but stood gaping at the man from the Home Office.

"What's that?" he said, in a voice that sounded almost hoarse. "Say that again."

"With pleasure," replied the doctor, "I thought it might be a bit of a surprise to you. The blood on that nightgown is not human blood. It's an animal's."

Fleming put out a hand jerkily and clutched the doctor's arm. "But some of it must be human," he almost wailed. "Some of it must be human."

"None of it. Not a drop," answered the other decisively.

The inspector shook him, almost as if he had been a naughty child, and then he realized what he was doing, released his hold, and apologized.

"I'm sorry, Doctor. But you have given me a

surprise and no mistake. There's no shadow of doubt about it, I suppose?"

"Oh, no. Not a shadow. It's quite certain."

"I see. Thank you very much. A rabbit, you say it is?"

"Something of the kind. A rabbit, guinea pig, hare—it might be any of those."

"I see. Thank you. Thank you very much."

"I'll be sending my report to you through the usual channels. You'll be getting it first thing to-morrow, I imagine. I just thought I'd drop in and give you an advance report, so to speak, in case it's urgent."

"That's very kind of you, Doctor," said the inspector mechanically, and he took off his hat and reseated himself at his desk, not even looking up at the departing analyst.

Half an hour later, he emerged from a short interview with the chief constable, issued instructions for the resumption of the search for Florian Root, dispatched a telegram to Berlin, and went home.

Next morning an astonished and excited world discovered in its newspapers that the case against Miss Lavender Arlington had been dropped, and that the actress had been released.

It is one of the phenomena of the age that a

man acquitted of murder, however unattractive his personal appearance may be, however devoid of talents his intellect may be, can nevertheless command an immense salary for weeks on the music halls or in revues, provided that there was the faintest suggestion of romance about the whole affair. For example, a man who is discharged, owing to lack of evidence, from the accusation of having killed his grandmother in Sheffield stands no chance in the entertainment world, nor does the race-gang murderer (alleged) in Hull, or the homicidal burglar (also alleged) of Glasgow, Huddersfield, or Birmingham. But the man who is found by a jury not to have strangled his beautiful girl-wife and chopped her into little bits at a south-coast seaside resort, the man who did not slip a double dose of arsenic into the tea of the young spark who took his girl to the pictures at Yeovil or Dorchester or Godalming—these can easily command a salary on the halls and a lump sum down from one of the Sunday papers for the exclusive story of their lives. And, incidentally, this lump sum from the Sunday papers can be doubled or trebled by judicious handling and with the advice of a first-class publicity agent, working on a commission basis. For, while the innocent man relates, or at any

rate signs, the exclusive story of his life for one newspaper, his sisters, aunts, and cousins can relate, or at any rate sign, the exclusive stories of their lives for rival journals—not, perhaps, at the same rate per thousand words, but at least at a sufficient remuneration for the entire family to settle in Scotland and buy land.

And, if this singular financial reward is the solace of any Tom, Dick, or Harry for his painful experience in the dock on a charge of which he is perfectly innocent, for the jury have said so, it is at least doubled if the Tom, Dick, or Harry happens to be a feminine one. Furthermore, if the innocent person is not only a woman, but also a beautiful woman, and, on top of these already overwhelming advantages, a world-famous one, it is hardly possible to calculate the size of the salary, the length of the contract, and the weight of the lump sum, always providing that the innocent person does not rely solely upon her innocence, but leans to a certain extent on the broad shoulders of a really first-class, front-rank, high-power publicity director.

It is sufficient to say that Lavender Arlington's publicity director was of the first class, of the front rank, and the very highest power. The rest can safely be left to the imagination.

The actress rode triumphantly on the crest of the greatest tidal wave of publicity that had ever been known in Fleet Street.

Fleming had an interview with her after her release, and found it, not surprisingly, an unsatisfactory one. Lavender Arlington was flushed with her triumph, and made no attempt to conceal her exultation. She was looking brilliantly handsome—"glittering" was the word Fleming mentally applied to her—and yet in some way she seemed to have become older and harder in the last two weeks. Her smile was as dazzling as ever, and yet it had a touch of hardness, of something that was not quite cruelty, but very near it. She had always been very sure of herself, but now she was almost defiantly self-confident. It was not a change for the better, thought the inspector.

He asked her a few questions, and her answers were flippant and even a little insolent, but once or twice she got a thrust past the detective's guard.

After a little preliminary skirmishing, Fleming said quietly, "You aren't quite out of it yet, you know, Miss Arlington."

"I jolly well hope not," was the swift retort. "This boosting may not carry on over the Aug-

ust slump. A nice little re-arrest about the beginning of September would suit us O. K. Can you do that, Mr. Copper, just to oblige an old friend?"

"You see," went on the inspector, ignoring the banter, "when we find Root we may be able to prove that you saw the murder done, or knew it was going to be done. We may even be able to prove that you did it after all, Miss Arlington, in spite of all your cleverness."

She laughed heartily. "Prove away, my dear boy," she cried. "Prove away. You're welcome to anything you can find, and it will be nice watching you at it."

"You won't tell me the whole story?"

"Ah, cut it out," she said scornfully. "There's nothing to tell."

"You did dope Celia Waldingham, didn't you?" he shot out.

Again there came a peal of ringing laughter. "Did you ever see Seymour Hicks?" she finally cried between silvery gusts. "Did you ever see him in a show called *Sleeping Partners?* The Elsom girl was in it."

"No, I didn't," replied Fleming.

"You should have. It was damned funny.

The man gets a girl to come round to his rooms one evening, and then, by a mistake, he gives her a sleeping draught instead of a cocktail. The curtain goes down on the girl sound asleep on the sofa, and the man saying, 'I thought I was going to be a lover, and all I can be is a night watchman.'" She pealed off again into laughter.

"I see what you mean," answered the detective stolidly.

"Good old Scotland," replied the actress. "Of course I gave Celia Waldingham the dope. If Harden had ever got to her room at one o'clock——"

"How did you know he was going at one o'clock?"

"Because he showed me the note she sent him."

"Why didn't you tell me all this before?"

Lavender Arlington yawned ostentatiously and covered her mouth with jewelled fingers. "Why should I? It was a private affair between me and that saintly, hypocritical little swine."

"Who do you mean?"

"Your delicate English flower of girlhood, my lad. That's who I mean. Your blue-eyed Celia. Do you know," she went on scornfully, "that

I'm astounded that you people from the Yard ever catch anyone. You're much too trusting. Much too confiding. That's your trouble."

"We didn't trust you, anyway," replied Fleming, a little nettled by the attack.

"Of course you didn't. That's exactly what I say. You're so damned conventional. You say, 'Hello, here's an actress. She must be a crook,' and you don't trust me an inch. Because I'm an actress, and in Queen Victoria's glorious days everyone looked down upon actresses, you look down upon me and distrust me, and finally arrest me, and make yourselves all look damned silly. But as soon as you see the Waldingham girl you say, 'Ha, an English lady, with blue eyes too; put her in a glass case until this horrid murdering actress is out of the way.' You're Victorian, Fleming, that's what you are—utterly and completely Victorian. Your mind is all wrapped up in a crinoline."

"Just as you like," answered the detective placidly. "Tell me about that nightgown of yours."

The actress started back in mock alarm, and screened her face with her hands. "Oh, what a word to use to a lady. The dear Queen would have said night-wear or sleeping-garb."

"Well, what about it? How did the blood get there?"

"My dear man, how should I know? Try and sharpen up your Nineteenth Century wits a little. How do you know that I sent off that nightgown?"

"The guard of the train identified you, and it was your nightgown."

"Have you ever seen a man who could look at a pretty girl for less than two minutes and then pick her out again afterwards? It can't be done. The poor dears are always too flustered. That guard was suddenly confronted by a pretty girl just as his train was starting, and then he picked me out at an identification parade. Identification parade! Sir Hugh Smithson was going to say a word or two about that parade, believe me or believe me not. We'd got the other nine females all ready to go into the box for the jury to have a look at. That guard was taped off all right. You can take that from me."

"Well, what's your idea?"

"That it was your blue-eyed Celia, my lad, that was trapesing over the countryside that morning. You go and get your sleuth hounds on to that for a bit. It'll give you all some practice. God knows you need it."

Fleming gazed at the carpet for a moment or two, and then he got up.

"Well, that's all, Miss Arlington. I can't say you've been very helpful."

"Helpful! Well, I call that ingratitude, after I've given you a good tip."

"It's only fair to warn you once again, Miss Arlington, that when we've found Root we may have something more to say to you."

"That's a pleasure in store for me."

"And, of course, you'll be watched."

"That won't be much of a novelty. I usually get a fair share of any watching that is going on."

Fleming could not help admiring the cool dexterity with which the actress met and parried every thrust.

"Well, I'll always say that you've got plenty of nerve, Miss Arlington," he said.

She threw back her head and laughed softly.

"Call me Lavender. There's a darling," she cooed.

"Now where do we stand?" mused the detective as he strolled thoughtfully away from the actress's flat, and as he approached Scotland Yard he was reluctantly compelled to answer the question with the words, "I don't know that we stand anywhere in particular."

The one thing of which he was certain was that either Root's evidence would definitely incriminate Lavender, or Lavender's evidence, if and when that lady made up her mind to tell everything she knew, would incriminate Root. There was no doubt that the obscurity which had shrouded the whole case and befogged the detective was gradually lifting. Lavender Arlington had doped Celia. Harden probably had doped Ellenberger—indeed, almost certainly had done so. He had done so before when he wanted to be free from the guardianship of his too-attentive Cerberus, and he almost certainly had done so again.

Fleming returned to the part played by the actress. Whatever the part was, she had never played one better, on or off the stage. What was the part? Harden had shown her the note containing the assignation. She had imagined that it was genuine; therefore it was more than likely that the note which she had seen was the note written in the handwriting which resembled Celia's. She had at once taken steps to prevent Celia from being awake at the rendezvous, and then—then what happened? Of course, she went to the rendezvous herself. There could be no reasonable doubt about that. A woman of

Lavender Arlington's calibre, of her fire and audacity, would not, could not, keep away on such an occasion. But Root, if he sent the note —or whoever it was who sent the note—must have been there too. Therefore they must all three have been somewhere near that corridor at about one o'clock. But if Root killed Harden, who was it that later stepped in the pool of blood? And Root entered the house with intent to kill Harden, otherwise what was the point of the elaborate alibi and the affair of the stone rabbits? But if he did not kill Harden, then Lavender Arlington must have done so, in which case the whole thing became more tangled in obscurities than ever.

"The only possible solution——" cried Fleming, and then he saw that passers-by were dumbfounded and a little nervous at his outburst. He turned hastily down towards Scotland Yard, and a few minutes later was seated at his desk.

"The only possible solution," he explained to the wall of his office, "is that a third party killed Harden at one o'clock, that Lavender Arlington came later, saw what had happened, and seized a wonderful chance of unparalleled publicity, and that later still Root turned up, also to murder

Harden, found he had been forestalled, trod in the pool, and beat it in a panic.

"That is the only possible solution, and I flatly refuse to believe that it's true."

He rang up the Half Moon Inn, and asked the detective who had been posted there to watch for Root's possible return to find out if any pet rabbits or guinea pigs had been mysteriously slaughtered on the morning after Harden's murder.

"The possibility of a third party," he considered again. "After all, why not?"

One of the difficulties about the whole case had been, from the beginning, the uniqueness of the victim and the extraordinary variety of individuals and interests who wanted him out of the way. It was, of course, the rendezvous with Marston that had finally decided the Frankfort syndicate and the Sons of Liberty to resort to desperate measures, the one to safeguard their concessions, the other their liberties. That rendezvous and Harden's fatal love affairs had started all the chain of disaster, and, if it was absolutely necessary to find a third party, either as the actual murderer or as the would-be murderer who had trodden in the pool of blood, there was no real lack of gentlemen with plenty

of motive and plenty of inclination for the job. The difficulty was to connect any one of them with anything that actually took place, and Fleming did not believe in his heart that a third person had been involved. The flight of Root and the conduct of Lavender Arlington between them, he felt certain, provided all the proof necessary that both of them were, in some way, in some varying degree, concerned with the murder. It was a waste of time to look farther afield. And yet—it was rather tempting. If that young Brookes had seen Harden, the famous Don Juan, and, in Brooke's eyes, a dago at that, fumbling with Celia Waldingham's door, anything might have happened. But, damn it all, this was old country he was traversing. Young Brookes knew nothing about the rendezvous. At least—half a minute—did he know nothing? Suppose Harden had gone and boasted to him about it? In that case, of course, young Brookes would have knocked him down on the spot, or at any rate, he would have tried to knock him down.

But suppose Lavender Arlington had told him? That was an idea. Suppose Lavender had gone straight to him from her quarrel with Harden in the library, and suppose she had whis-

pered in his ear, "Your girl has an assignation with Harden to-night," he would instantly have called her a liar, or as near it as an Old Wykhamist can get to the difficult task of hinting to a lady that she is speaking an untruth. Then Delilah would have whispered, "If I'm a liar, all right, and no harm's done. But if I'm not, go and watch the first floor corridor at five minutes to one and see for yourself."

And then, of course, he would have called her a liar again and gone to bed. And then—Fleming pictured the young man lying with wide-open eyes, staring into the darkness, and wondering, and cursing himself for wondering, and then finding himself wondering again, until at last he could stand it no longer. Perhaps a door creaked somewhere in the house, or there was a noise that sounded like a footstep on the passage, and young Brookes got up. He hated and despised himself for doing it, and for all that it implied —his doubts, his lack of faith, his lack of chivalry. Fleming pictured him creeping down the stairs, listening to the sound of Harden's bedroom door opening, listening to the shuffle of Harden's bedroom slippers along the parquet, and then seeing red.

Well, it was all possible, of course, and Flem-

ing sighed. Then he telephoned to 24B Eaton Square and arranged to call and see Brookes that evening at six o'clock.

That afternoon a telegram arrived from Von Hoffmann as follows:

IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENT IN WESTBROOK CASE AM RETURNING LONDON BY AIR ARRIVING TO-NIGHT ABOUT EIGHT MEET ME CROYDON IF POSSIBLE STOP GIVE MY HEARTIEST CONGRATULATIONS TO LAVENDER'S PUBLICITY MAN MESSAGE ENDS.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SECOND DEATH OF FLORIAN ROOT

Fleming was ushered into the drawing room of 24B Eaton Square at six o'clock, immediately after a large tray of cocktails, and he saw that, besides Sir Arthur, Celia, and Leslie Brookes, there was also present the ever-buoyant Peter St. John. After the baronet had bestowed his usual absent-minded greeting upon the detective, the Anglo-Baltanian characteristically took charge of the situation and the conversation.

"And have you got that warrant for me yet, Inspector?" he inquired earnestly.

"No," replied Fleming, "and I'm afraid we're not likely to get one now."

"Too bad, too bad," answered St. John. "That's altogether too bad. It's going to make my position exceedingly difficult when I get back to Baltania. My only chance is to persuade them that my exceptional brilliance outwitted the entire resources of Scotland Yard."

"Oh, you won't have much difficulty in doing that," observed Fleming drily.

"I hope not. But it's going to be tricky work. You see"—he turned affably to the others—"you see, I've got to persuade the headquarters of the Sons of Liberty that it was I who murdered Harden, and, not only that, but that it was I who killed Root, and that's going to be awkward considering that Root is still alive."

"Yes, and considering that everyone must know from our advertisements that Root is still alive," put in the detective. "How will you get round that?"

"Oh, I shall think up a story," answered St. John airily. "It will probably be based on the incredible ineptitude of Scotland Yard."

"I see. Thank you very much."

"I've just been telling Sir Arthur that I'm going back to-morrow to Baltania. You don't want my advice and assistance any more, I take it?"

Fleming looked at him earnestly. "I wish I could get you on a charge of being an accessory before the fact, Mr. St. John," he said, with such obvious sincerity that St. John laughed heartily.

"Never mind, old boy, you can't win every time, you know. Well, I must go off and do some packing."

"Before you go, Mr. St. John," said Fleming, "will you tell me one thing?"

"If you're a good boy and don't ask me anything too difficult."

"It's this. During the last few days at Westbrook I got the impression, and Detective-Inspector Von Hoffmann got it too, that you were afraid of going near the river. You looked like a man who was afraid of something coming from that direction."

"Oh, I looked like that, did I? Well?"

"What was the reason for it?"

"The reason for my being afraid?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was the reason."

"What was?"

"The reason was so that I should appear afraid."

"I don't follow."

"You dear old donkey," exclaimed St. John, clapping the detective on the shoulder, "it was done for the sole purpose of giving you two chaps something more to think about. You were in danger of stagnating. Stagnating. Just think of it. I wasn't going to let that happen if I could help it. So I pretended to be afraid of going down to the river."

Peter St. John swept a low bow to the company, and with the words, "*Hasta la vista, señorita y señores*," he swung round and marched gaily out of the room.

"I hope that's the last we shall see of him," said Fleming a little sourly, and, when Brookes exclaimed "Hear, hear," Celia Waldingham laughed. "I don't," she said. "I liked him. He made me laugh. Didn't he make you laugh, Mr. Fleming?"

"No."

"Oh, he made me laugh like anything."

"Damned scamp!" muttered Brookes, and then, with a badly concealed desire to change the conversation, he turned to Fleming. "Did you want to see me about something?"

"Yes. Don't go, Sir Arthur. It's a small point that needs to be cleared up. It's about Miss Arlington's movements——"

Celia interrupted in astonishment. "But I thought Lavender had been acquitted, or whatever you call it."

"She has been released," replied Fleming, with intentional emphasis on the last word.

"Do you mean——" began Brookes.

"I mean that she has been released. I can't say any more about it than that. But what I can

say is this: we want information, if possible, about her movements after half-past-eleven, when Harden left the library. So far her story has been that she went straight to bed. But one or two facts have come to light"—here Fleming was beginning to bluff—"in the last few hours which convince me that she did not go straight to bed." He was watching young Brookes very carefully. "I am quite certain that I have not been told of Lavender Arlington's movements after half-past eleven on that night. She did not go straight to bed. She went to one of the other bedrooms in the house, and went in and told the occupant of it a story which that occupant knew to be a false and slanderous libel."

There was a sort of strangled cry—a cross between a cry and a gasp—from Sir Arthur, and the other three turned on him.

"It's true," he exclaimed with another gasp. "It's true. She came to my room at about twelve."

"She came to your room," ejaculated the flabbergasted detective. "To your room, Sir Arthur?"

"Yes, sir," he replied, a little more firmly. "She came to my room at about midnight."

"And why have I not been told of this before?"

Before the distressed baronet had time to pull himself together and answer this question, Leslie Brookes chipped in.

"She also came to my room, you know."

"When?"

"I didn't look at the clock. Somewhere about midnight, I suppose."

Fleming began to get annoyed. "Look here, Mr. Brookes, and you too, Sir Arthur, you've been guilty of a grave fault in not telling me this before. And I'm still waiting for your explanation. Come, gentlemen, your explanation."

The baronet's dreaming and distant expression hardened into something that rather resembled the appearance of an obstinate and stubborn rabbit, and it was Brookes who answered for both.

"The explanation's obvious. She came with what you yourself called just now 'a false and slanderous libel.' The woman was mad with jealousy. She came and told me a wicked lie. I don't care a damn if I did impede the course of justice, as I've no doubt you'll say in a minute. Lavender told me that Celia had invited—had made an assignation with Harden for one o'clock that morning."

Celia Waldingham exclaimed "What!" but

the young man paid no attention. "Do you think I was going to bring that story up next day? No damned fear!"

"Even when you knew it wasn't true?"

"Slander sticks in people's minds. I wasn't going to chance it."

"And I suppose that is your explanation also, Sir Arthur?"

Sir Arthur nodded.

"I see," said Fleming thoughtfully: "I see"; and, without another word, he left the house and proceeded to Croydon.

Von Hoffmann's aeroplane appeared in the distance of a summer evening sky at a few minutes after a quarter to eight, and by eight o'clock the burly German had extricated himself from the pilot's seat. Flying was one of his hobbies, and he indulged in it whenever he could beg or borrow an aeroplane.

Fleming had a police car waiting, and the two men drove rapidly to London.

"What's your news?" was the German's first remark, and Fleming answered, "Mine can wait. What's your important development?"

"Important development?" The other wrinkled his brow.

"Yes. The one you spoke of in your telegram."

Von Hoffmann grinned. "Oh, that one! It doesn't really exist, so to speak."

"Doesn't exist! What do you mean?"

"Well, you see, when I got your telegram about the Arlington's release I couldn't resist it. I simply had to come back and see what it was all about. And a few minutes afterwards a man walked into my office who owns half a dozen aeroplanes—a business man from München. It seemed providential. So I wired you and set off. That bit about the 'important development' was in case the minister happened to ask for me."

"Do you mean to say, you old crook——" began Fleming, but his friend interrupted.

"I couldn't keep away from it. It was too much to ask."

"Anyway," answered the Scotsman. "I'm very glad to see you again."

"How do we stand? What's been happening?"

The remainder of the journey to Fleming's house in Highgate was occupied with a monologue by the Scotland Yard man, the Berliner listening intently, with his huge bullet head sunk upon his chest. Supper was a silent meal, and it was not until the table had been cleared, with the exception of a bottle of whisky, water, and glasses, and pipe and cigar were in full blast,

that the detectives made any further reference to the Westbrook murders.

It was Von Hoffmann who spoke first, ruminatively.

"Root is the key to the position," he said. "Root went to elaborate pains to prove that on Monday morning he himself had been dead for at least twenty-four hours. The bogus bathe, the circle on the arm, the business with the two rabbits—that was all designed for one end only: to prove himself dead. That is the best alibi of all. Very well, he made his ingenious alibi for some reason. What was the reason? The best way of finding out is by catching him and asking him."

"Actually, of course, the reason was that he was going to kill Harden."

"Exactly. But did he? And, if he did, who stepped in the blood; and, if he didn't, why didn't he?"

"Because someone else did."

"Yes, of course. But that brings us back to one of our early problems: if Root made the one-o'clock assignation, why didn't he keep it; and, if he didn't, who did?"

"Lavender Arlington."

"Or Leslie Brookes. He had a perfectly good

motive, and now we know that he knew that at one o'clock Harden would be in the corridor."

"Then who sent the note? If Root sent it, why didn't he keep the appointment? If he didn't send it, who did?"

"Well, Brookes might have, and then acted thunderingly well ever since. Or—after all, Fleming, feminine nature is an inscrutable affair—the girl may have sent the note herself. It's a possibility."

"If it comes to that," said Fleming with a laugh, "the absent-minded baronet may have sent it."

"Yes. But, as I say, the really important thing to do is to get hold of Root, and then we shall have some facts."

"And what about Lavender?"

Von Hoffmann took a deep pull at his cigar and blew a series of perfect rings. "Whatever part she played," he said, "I take my hat off to her. There's a brain for you. There's a coolness. There's a nerve. What a woman, Fleming! Consider. There are only two alternatives. Either she killed him, and invented all that publicity business to attract attention to herself, and so, in the end, throw sand in our eyes; or else she really didn't kill him, but saw the body later on,

and devised the photograph and nightgown tricks simply and solely as publicity for herself. In other words, it was either a dodge to save her life or else publicity for publicity's sake. In any case, what brilliance! What a woman! And now let us talk about golf. I went out to Wannsee yesterday evening and had a round, but, I tell you, Fleming, I've got into a most damnable habit of slicing my putts."

Fleming jumped up and extracted a putter from a corner of the room.

"Have you ever tried this?" he asked. "It's the American tip of overlapping——"

Nothing more was said about the Westbrook murders that night.

Next morning, Von Hoffmann's first words at breakfast were, "It's quite imperative to catch Root, you know."

The two friends went down together to Scotland Yard, and Fleming found on his desk a message from the Half Moon Inn near Westbrook. The detective on duty had found that a pet rabbit belonging to the small daughter of the tenant of the Home Farm had escaped about a fortnight before. The door of its hutch had somehow become unlatched, and the rabbit had escaped.

"What a nerve!" repeated Von Hoffmann again on reading the message. "She went down at the crack of dawn and stole that poor rabbit and killed it. What a woman!"

"This case is getting quite a rabbity flavour," observed Fleming grimly, as he hung his hat upon its peg and settled down to work. He had hardly glanced at the first of a pile of documents when the solemn figure of Sergeant Maitland came in and saluted.

There was something in his usually impassive and unemotional countenance that made Fleming say sharply, "Well, Maitland, what is it?"

"There's a report, sir," replied the sergeant, who was obviously labouring under a state of partially suppressed excitement, "from the British Consulate at Dijon, in France. The consul wires that he believes he has found the man Root, sir."

"Found him! Good. Good," exclaimed Fleming, and Von Hoffmann echoed, "Goot, goot," under his breath.

"The man he thinks is Root died——"

"Died!" exclaimed the two inspectors simultaneously.

"Yes, sir," replied the sergeant. "Died day before yesterday in hospital at Dijon of injuries

received in the railway accident at Montbard."

"Damn it!" exclaimed Fleming, striking the table with the palm of his hand. "Damn it! I hope it isn't him. We had better send over someone to identify at once. Let me see. Sir Arthur had better go"—he picked up a telephone—"and I'll see if I can persuade him to fly over."

"I'll take him over," exclaimed Von Hoffmann eagerly. He was always on the look-out for the excuse for a flight.

A brief conversation with the bewildered baronet sufficed to persuade him to entrust himself to the German's aeronautical skill, and the Fokker machine left Croydon shortly after eleven o'clock that morning, bound for Dijon.

At five o'clock in the evening Fleming received a telegram:

BODY IDENTIFIED AS FLORIAN ROOT AM RETURNING TONIGHT HOFFMANN.

and it was past midnight when the Berlin inspector let himself into the house at Highgate. He looked tired, and some of his innate cheerfulness seemed to have temporarily vanished.

Fleming, who had sat up for him, mixed a long and strong whisky and water, and was not surprised to see it drained at a gulp.

"So it was Root," he said finally.

"It was Root all right. I got the hospital people to arrange a sort of identification parade of dead men in the mortuary, and Waldingham picked out the right one unerringly. And there's lots more proofs. I've brought a big bundle back with me."

He spoke so heavily and dully that the other looked at him curiously, "You're tired, old chap," he said.

"Mentally tired."

"Yes. It must be a strain piloting all that time."

"Oh, that was nothing. It wasn't that made me tired. Look here, Fleming, you've had a nice quiet day, I hope. No worries? No troubles?"

"Nothing much. Why?"

"Well, you've got me to thank for that. I didn't put everything into that telegram from Dijon that I might have. I wanted you to have a pleasant evening."

Fleming sat bolt upright. "What do you mean?" he asked sharply.

"I'll tell you what I mean. Harden was killed first thing on Monday morning, June 22nd. On the Sunday night Root carted up that rabbit, left it on the lawn to help with his alibi, entered

the house, and either killed Harden or trod in the pool of blood. That seems all right, doesn't it? But it doesn't account for the fact that the railway accident to the Paris-Geneva express took place at Montbard at 2.21 p. m. on the afternoon of Sunday, June 21st, and that Root was taken into the Dijon hospital two hours later on that afternoon."

There was a pause, and then Von Hoffmann got up slowly.

"I'm going to bed," he said. "Good-night."

CHAPTER XXII

"...AND USED IN EVIDENCE AGAINST YOU"

"IT MEANS beginning it all over again from the very beginning," observed Fleming gloomily to the teapot.

"I could do with another sausage," replied the Berlin detective. "Yes. We must begin at the very beginning, or, at any rate, from pretty near it. What annoys me is the collapse of that really beautiful explanation of mine about the rabbits. That really does rather worry me. It was absolutely flawless as a piece of pure reasoning."

"Flawless, except that it was wrong from beginning to end," said the Scotsman maliciously.

Von Hoffmann sighed. "Yes. And, of course, that is a big drawback to a piece of pure reasoning. But it did seem to account for everything, didn't it?"

"And now we've got to start again and find a fresh explanation for that confounded stone rabbit. The only other possible one is that the whole thing is the work of a lunatic."

"Maybe. But I should like to know if it was a lunatic operating from inside or outside the house. And, excluding the lunatic for a moment, let us assume it was an ordinary sane man. What was that rabbit for? What was it for? It was in order to sink a corpse to the bottom of a sea, river, pond, pool, or lake. It must have been. Then why lug it away from the available river? Answer, because the river would be dragged at once. But there was already a body in it, attached to the other rabbit. Therefore"—Von Hoffmann was soliloquizing—"therefore he, she, or they did not mind if that body was discovered. But they did mind if the second body, Harden's, was discovered, otherwise they would have dumped it also in the river."

"But it was discovered," put in Fleming, and the German detective started.

"True; it was discovered. They meant that it shouldn't be, but it was. Why? Did they leave in a hurry? Was the murder plot surprised in its middle, so to speak? Yes. Who by? By Lavender Arlington. Eh? Eh? What about that, Fleming, what about that?"

"I'm getting a little distrustful of these flights of pure reasoning, or whatever it was you called it, when you proved that a man was creeping

about Westbrook when he really was in a Dijon hospital. The first question that a plain man would ask would be, 'If he, she or they intended to dump Harden's body in some place other than the river, what place was it?'"

"It's a good point," conceded Von Hoffmann. "Ring up Sir Arthur and find out if there's a pond or well or anything in the neighbourhood."

"There isn't. I went over all that."

"There might be a disused well that you missed, mightn't there? Ring him up and see. Give my latest flight of reasoning a chance."

Fleming finished his cup of tea and rang up 24B Eaton Square. The baronet was in, and the detective put his question. Von Hoffmann watched his face change as he listened to the reply.

"You're right," Fleming said, as he replaced the receiver. "There is a disused well. It hasn't been used for at least forty years. It's covered with thick bushes—rhododendrons or something of the sort—near the gardener's tool shed."

There was a silence, broken by the German s thoughtful remark. "It's odd. It's most extremely odd."

Fleming glanced at him. "It is odd. There's no doubt about it."

"Hasn't been used for at least forty years," mused Von Hoffmann. "That means that if my new theory—our new theory——"

"Your new theory," said Fleming firmly.

"Well, my new theory—if it is correct—it means that the man who carried the rabbit up to the lawn knew about the existence of the well."

"That would be Root."

"At that moment lying in a hospital in Dijon," was the dry answer.

"If not Root, then who?"

There was the faintest possible pause before Von Hoffmann answered, "Anyone who knew the place well, like the gardeners, or anyone who knew the people well and happened to find out."

"That's a pretty wide field."

"Yes." The answer was so short and decisive that Fleming expected that more would come, but the big Berliner was lost in thought.

"Look here, Fleming," he said at last, "let's go back to the note which Harden showed the Arlington girl. She thought it was genuine, therefore she didn't write it herself. Then who did write it? Someone who knew the ways of the house; someone who had a chance of passing the note to Harden; someone who knew Celia's

writing well enough to imitate it, possibly someone who knew the existence of a forty-years-disused well; someone who knew that Celia took orangeade and put a dope in it——"

"Oh, no," interrupted Fleming. "Lavender did that. She doped Celia, and Harden doped Ellenberger."

"Of course, that's true." He stopped suddenly, and said, "By George, Fleming, that's a peculiar thing. I wonder why neither of us noticed it before."

"Noticed what?"

"Why, that both Celia and Ellenberger were doped, but the girl got up with a headache at about seven o'clock in the morning, whereas the man, who looks as if he was as strong as a horse, didn't get up with a headache until after ten o'clock."

Fleming looked a little put out, and the German laughed. "Ha, ha! That hadn't occurred to you, had it?"

"It hadn't actually occurred to me," conceded Fleming. "I can't think why it didn't. What do you make of it? One dose was stronger than the other, perhaps. That would account for it."

"There were only two doses in the bottle, and

Miss Arlington says it was pretty nearly half full when she got it from Harden."

"Well?"

"It looks to me," said Von Hoffmann slowly, "as if the unfortunate Ellenberger had been doped twice that night—once by Ferdinand Harden to prevent his interfering in the intrigue, and once by someone else who knew that Ellenberger was a desperately faithful and loyal retainer."

"Yes. It might be so. It might very well be so," agreed Fleming.

"And that would point more than ever to someone inside the house."

"Well, Leslie Brookes had motive, opportunity, and knowledge that Harden was going to be in the corridor at one o'clock."

"Yes," said Von Hoffmann, looking at him with a queer expression, "Leslie Brookes had all those three things. But he wasn't the only one who had motive, opportunity, and knowledge that Harden was going to be in the corridor at one o'clock."

"Go on," said Fleming in a low voice.

"The note which Harden showed Lavender Arlington convinced her that it was genuine.

She thought it was Celia's writing. Your expert said that one of the notes might have been written by a relation. We thought it might be Root, who was her uncle. But she has other relations besides uncles—other relations, and closer relations."

"Go on."

"If my guess about the rabbit is correct, how many people really knew about that well? We say that lots of people might have known. But how many really did? It's a very unlikely thing to have been a bit of common knowledge. Even the gardeners wouldn't be certain to know. But anyone who had played at Westbrook as a boy—that's different. It's just the sort of thing a boy would have known and played with."

"I say, Von Hoffmann, this is a pretty horrible idea," muttered Fleming.

"Horrible, perhaps, but it might explain one or two things, mightn't it?"

"Let's consider the whole thing from the beginning," said Fleming, "and see where we stand. Kauskas came up on the Friday night to spy out the land. Harden and Root met him, realized their danger, and killed him. Root, knowing that the Sons of Liberty would be after him, as well as the British law, worked up that

bathe and his faked tattoo mark, and then beat it for France and ran into that railway smash. That is Drama Number One.

"On Sunday, someone decided to remove Harden. He sent him the note, doped Ellenberger, and waited. Harden showed Arlington the note, and she went and told Brookes and Sir Arthur, doped Celia, and waited for one o'clock.

"At the fatal hour, Harden comes out of his door—and then what happens?"

"Something like this." The German took up the tale. "Harden comes out of his door at the top of the back stairs, and is at once stabbed by —by someone waiting on the back stairs, just around the corner. Hence the two spots of blood at that end of the corridor. At that moment, where is Lavender Arlington? She must be standing—there is only one place where a frantically passionate and jealous woman could be standing at such a moment—on the main stairs, just round the corner from Celia's door. If her faithless lover does keep his tryst with his new flame, Miss Lavender is going to be on hand to kick up a hullabaloo, and that's the spot where she waited. She must have. Now, then, what happens? Harden comes out and is stabbed. The noise makes Lavender at once look round the corner to

see what's happened. She couldn't resist it. And she sees two things. Firstly, she sees the man who has wronged her and discarded her, reeling for a second before he falls in a heap on the floor. And, secondly, she sees something even more terrible, even more hideous, even more appalling."

"Good God!" exclaimed Fleming. "What did she see?"

"She saw that something had happened which she had never really in her innermost heart believed would happen. She saw that Ferdinand Harden was on his way to keep the tryst with Celia Waldingham. And for a moment she went mad. She rushed at the body, seized the dagger—she didn't stop to consider how it got there or what it all meant—she seized the dagger, and in a blind, wild paroxysm of fury she stabbed her lover over and over again. Then she seized the body and dragged it along the corridor, and put the dead fingers on to the handle. If Celia had stolen her lover, Celia should have the public shame and scandal as well.

"And then Lavender Arlington went back to her room and took stock of her position. And a devilish tight corner she was in. Probably there was blood on her nightgown—real human blood

this time—and it was that which gave her the idea that she carried out so brilliantly.

"At any rate, that's my idea of what happened."

"That leaves three questions unanswered. First, the alternative note——"

"I can answer that," exclaimed Von Hoffmann. "I can see how that happened. After Lavender had gone back to her room, she suddenly thought of Celia's note. If that could be found on Harden's body, it would clinch Celia's part in the intrigue. She went back and looked in his dressing-gown pockets. The note wasn't there, so she manufactured a second note. But she was clever enough not to attempt to forge the writing; she wrote it with her left hand, and then had to add the initials so that everyone would understand who it was from."

"Well," said Fleming. "there's something rather plausible about that. The second question is: Who wore the boots made in Riga and stepped in the pool of the blood?"

"I can't answer that. It doesn't fit into my theory."

"And the third is: Who delivered the first blow with the dagger?"

"I think," said Von Hoffmann heavily. "I think, if I were you, I would go down to 24B Eaton Square and ask there."

"I think," said Fleming, "that perhaps you are right."

Celia was alone in the library when the two inspectors were shown in, and there was an unaccustomed gloominess in their expressions which somehow filled her with a vague alarm. She had liked and respected the two famous champions of law and order during their stay at Westbrook, and she had regarded them as friends and protectors in a maze of murder and murderers. Now she suddenly felt that champions of law and order can be terrible people as well as protectors.

She looked from one to the other, and missed the quiet, friendly smile of Fleming and the broad grin of the German.

"What is it? Is anything the matter?" she asked breathlessly.

"I should like to see your father, Miss Waldingham, for a moment, and also, if he is in the house, Mr. Brookes."

"Yes. Leslie is in the house. I'll go and see—I'll try and find father—— Mr. Fleming, why are you looking at me like that?"

The detective turned away awkwardly, and

muttered something about not meaning to look at her in any special way.

"There is something wrong," the girl said. "I know that something's wrong. What is it?"

"It's only a point I wanted to raise with your father, Miss Waldingham. I thought he might be able to throw some light upon it. By the way, Miss Waldingham, you could help me, perhaps. Whereabouts exactly in the garden at Westbrook is the disused well?"

"Disused well?" Celia replied, wrinkling her brows. "Disused well? I didn't know there was such a thing."

"You've never heard it mentioned?"

"Never."

There was a silence, and then Celia said again, "I know something's wrong. What is it?"

"It's nothing, I assure you——" began Fleming but she interrupted him with the words, "It's some bad news. But if you don't want to tell me, I won't go on about it. I'll go and find father."

When she had gone out, Von Hoffmann said gloomily, "If she didn't know about the well, it's very unlikely that young Brookes knew about it."

"And that leaves——"

"Yes. But I suppose it's better that than the

boy. I mean, from the girl's point of view. Though it's pretty damnable either way. What are you going to say?"

"I shall try him with a bogus confession, and see how it works on him."

At that moment Sir Arthur hurried in with his nervous, restless uncertainty of manner, as if he were not sure whether his library contained a giraffe or an Anglican bishop, and was equally prepared or unprepared for either.

"Ah! My dear sir, my dear Mr.—er—Fleming. *Meinherr.*" He bowed and waved round the room. "Do sit down, do sit down. A cigar?"

Leslie Brooks strolled in behind him, with one arm linked through Celia's, and nodded pleasantly to the two men.

Fleming was disconcerted. "Oh, Miss Waldingham, if you don't mind——" he said, but Brookes replied:

"Is it anything very terrible you want us for, Inspector? Because, if not, Miss Waldingham would like to stay and listen. We've got a clear hour before we are due at the registrar's, and it's only round the corner."

"You are going to get married?" exclaimed Fleming, and Von Hoffmann muttered a deep ejaculation:

"Yes, they insist on a registry," said Sir Arthur. "They won't wait for a decent wedding in a church."

"I do think you might congratulate us," complained Brookes. "It's a wedding, not a funeral, you know. Will you come and sign the register, Hindenburg, old chap?"

"Look here, Brookes," struck in Fleming, firmly resolved not to let sentiment obscure his sense of duty, "I want to know whether you can help me about this. You were fairly well acquainted with Westbrook, weren't you—the house and grounds, I mean?"

"Fairly well. I've often stayed there."

"Then perhaps you can tell us where the disused well is?"

"Disused well?" said the young man, and Sir Arthur echoed the words, "Disused well?" and was going to say something more when Fleming cut him short with a "Quite so, Sir Arthur."

"Didn't know there was one," went on Brookes. "You'd better ask Sir Arthur."

The Scotland Yard man turned to Celia. "I would sooner that you left the room, but, if you insist on staying, I will say no more."

"I'll stay," said Celia, all her vague fears and

alarms coming back with a rush. Fleming addressed Sir Arthur.

"Very well. It is my duty as an officer of the Metropolitan Police to tell you that an important statement has just come to hand relating to the murder of Ferdinand Harden. When the murder was committed, an eye-witness was present and saw it done."

"What!" exclaimed Brookes and Celia simultaneously.

Sir Arthur said nothing, but blinked at the detective.

"The eye-witness was Miss Arlington, and she has sworn on oath that the man who stabbed Ferdinand Harden in the corridor of Westbrook House on the morning of Monday, June the 22d, was you, Sir Arthur."

Leslie Brookes sprang up, and his chair fell back on the floor with a crash, Celia gave a faint cry, and turned as white as a sheet. Sir Arthur Waldingham still said nothing, but continued to blink at Fleming.

Brookes began to say something, but Fleming silenced him with a word, and all eyes were concentrated on the baronet.

"Well, Sir Arthur," said the inspector grimly, "we're waiting for you."

Sir Arthur started, as if he were being spoken to for the first time, and looked up.

"Waiting," he said mildly. "Waiting for what?"

"For some sort of comment on Miss Arlington's story."

"Oh, that," answered Sir Arthur. "That's all nonsense, of course. What puzzles me is why she invented such a wicked story. So far as I know, we've always got on very well together."

"So you deny the story?"

"Deny it?" Sir Arthur was surprised. "Of course I deny it. Why, you surely didn't think—you couldn't have—upon my soul, Inspector, I believe you really thought for a moment——"

"I did think, and I still do think," was the grave reply.

"Oh, I say!" exploded Brookes. "What utter rot! What a damned liar Lavender is!"

Celia said nothing, but stood like a white statue, her eyes fixed on the detective.

"There are only two people who could possibly have been in a position," said Fleming, "to have murdered Harden. Those two are yourself, Sir Arthur, and you, Mr. Brookes. There was nothing to choose between you until the disused well came to light. I am satisfied that you, Mr.

Brookes, knew nothing of the existence of the well, and that you, Sir Arthur, did know of it."

"Certainly I knew of it, and equally certainly I am sure that Leslie did not know of it."

"But still you deny that you stabbed Ferdinand Harden?"

"Of course I deny it." The baronet had a little colour in his face, and spoke more firmly than usual.

"Very well," said Fleming. "I'm afraid I must ask you to accompany me to Scotland Yard."

"But the wedding," protested Sir Arthur.

"The wedding must wait."

CHAPTER XXIII

"THERE AIN'T NO SICH PERSON"

"WELL, that's that," observed Von Hoffmann, as the two friends strolled down Whitehall after lunch. "But I fancy you'll have a job to prove it."

"I'll prove it," answered Fleming doggedly. "I'm going down to Westbrook this evening, and I'm going through that house with a comb and a microscope until I've proved it. It's absolutely out of the question that a bungling, muddling old fool like that could have stabbed a man and got away without leaving something behind him. He must have left some clue, and I'll find it."

"Good luck to you. As a matter of fact, I'm much more interested in the Riga boots. If you'll solve that little puzzle you'll be doing me a service. It annoys me, that does; annoys me a good deal."

"I expect that will fall into place when I've got everything straightened."

"I hope so. At present, as I say, it annoys me. I'm sorry for that girl."

"So am I. Especially as, in a sense, she was primarily responsible for the whole thing. I mean, it was her fatal charms that attracted Harden and made the old man so desperately determined to save her from him."

"Extraordinary," mused Von Hoffmann, "extraordinary how suddenly a perfect bunny of a man can be turned into a wildcat if you just touch the right chord."

"Talking about bunnies," said Fleming, "I got a man to go over the garden at Westbrook and report if there were any suitable stones for weighting corpses lying about nearer the house. He says that there were a few smallish round ones, but nothing half so suitable as the rabbits. So your ingenious idea to account for the rabbits being used was really rather too clever. They were used because they were the best available weights."

"I'd rather not hear any more about that," answered Von Hoffmann with a wry grin. "It all came from my being so exceptionally clever. Let's go and see Lavender Arlington, and put it to her that she really did stab Harden, only it was after he was dead already."

They hailed a cab, and in a few minutes entered the Gaiety stage door and sent their names

up. The actress received them in her dressing room. A rehearsal of *The Daffodil Girl* was due to begin in a few minutes.

"Well, boys," she said composedly as they came in, "what's biting you now? Someone else been done in?"

"Miss Arlington," answered Fleming seriously, "I hope this is the last time I shall come and bother you."

"It's no bother," she replied with a mock graciousness. "It gives me a great feeling of security having you fellows around."

"We think we've worked out the part you played in the whole business," went on the detective, "and we would like to know if we're right."

"Oh, you would, would you?" was the dry response.

"Our idea was that it went something like this"; and Fleming sketched out the sequence of events, so far as they concerned the movements of the actress, between half-past eleven on the Sunday night, when Harden boasted to her of his assignation, and eight o'clock on the following morning, when she handed her second parcel to the guard of the train at Mitcham.

The actress listened intently, her chin resting

on her hand and her brilliant eyes fixed upon the detective's face.

At the end of the story a silence fell which neither of the two men liked to break. At last Lavender Arlington got up and walked across to the window, and looked down upon the seething traffic of the Strand. Then she turned and faced them.

"Look here," she said. "I'll tell you something, but I'll only tell it to one of you. I don't trust you fellows very far, and I won't say a word if there are two of you. Fleming, you run downstairs and wait in the street—on the other side, where I can see you from here—and I'll speak a word to young Tiny here. Run along. There's a big boy."

"I assure you, Miss Arlington," said Fleming, "there's no question of bringing a charge against you."

"I don't care. I'm taking no chances."

The inspector shrugged his shoulders, picked up his hat, and held out his hand.

"In that case, I'll go. Good-bye, Miss Arlington."

"Good-bye, Fleming. I'll send you a box for the show. You deserve it after all the publicity you've given me."

She stood at the window and watched until the

figure of the detective appeared in the street below, and then she said coolly:

"Well, I guess that little story was mostly yours."

"It was."

"Then you'll be interested to hear that it's pretty nearly exactly true. There's really only one thing to add to it."

"And that is?"

"That the murderer went down the back stairs and let me tell you he went down like a shot from a gun."

"You're quite certain?"

"Quite."

"He didn't slip into one of the bedrooms?"

"Oh, boy, I'm telling you," said the actress impatiently, "he went down the back stairs."

"Did you see him?"

"No. I heard him, and saw his shadow. But I didn't see him."

"And that's all?" asked Von Hoffmann.

"Yes."

"In that case"—he held out an enormous hand—"good-bye. Look me up next time you're in Berlin."

"I shan't go to Berlin again," she answered in a low voice. "Last time I was there it was

with——" She broke off. "Anyway, *auf wiedersehen*—good luck."

"*Auf wiedersehen*," he answered, clicking his heels.

He repeated this conversation on rejoining Fleming in the street, ending up with the words, "What do you make of that, eh?"

"Make of what? It's exactly what we expected."

"I mean, that flight down the stairs instead of simply backing into his bedroom?"

"He'd got the wind up. Poor old boy. I'm not surprised."

"That must have been it," replied Von Hoffmann abstractedly.

"Are you coming down to Westbrook with me this afternoon?" asked Fleming. "I'm going back to the Yard now to clear up some odds and ends, pick up a microscope man, and then I'm going off."

"I don't think so," answered the other. "It's a perfect day for flying, and I ought to be back in Berlin."

"By the way, did you ever catch Von Winckel?"

"Not I. He's clean vanished. I'll come back with you to the Yard and pick up my bag."

At headquarters, Fleming found a large packet on his desk, marked, in red pencil, "Root, Florian, No. 003184."

He opened it, and found that the top paper was a letter from the British Consul at Dijon.

"Oh, it's Root's belongings," he said, "come back from Dijon." He turned them over casually. "Yes, here they are—passport, money, notebook, fountain pen, ticket to Frankfort, three-and-sixpenny copy of *The Masked Murderer*——"

"Ticket to where?" said Von Hoffmann in a voice of thunder.

"Ticket to Frankfort-on-the-Main. Why, what's the matter?"

"Frankfort-am-Main. Of all places in the world for Root to take a ticket to! Frankfort."

"I don't quite see why he shouldn't."

"Don't you remember? The home of the syndicate that is exploiting Baltanian minerals. The people who employed Von Winckel. The people who were up against Marston and Reinach's."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Fleming, and again, in a different, more emphatic tone, "By Jove!"

"Who was Root, anyway?" said Von Hoffmann. "Who the devil was he? It seems to me we haven't paid enough attention to him

and his antecedents. How did he get all that money?"

"As he couldn't have been concerned in the murder, I don't see that it really matters very much. But still, we certainly ought to know."

"I suggest ringing up Marston at Reinach's and asking him. He's sure to be able to tell us something."

Fleming gave telephone instructions that an appointment was to be made as soon as possible with Mr. Marston, and then turned to his papers.

Von Hoffmann stood with his hands in his pockets gazing absently out of the window. His forehead was corrugated into a frown, and he shook his head slightly from time to time in a puzzled, rather irritated way, and once he muttered, "Oh, damn it all!" in English, and once, "*Der Teufel!*"

There was a knock, and Sergeant Maitland entered.

"The car is here, sir."

"All right."

"And Sergeant Hollow is ready, sir."

"Sergeant Hollow?"

"Yes, sir. The microscope sergeant, sir."

"Oh, yes. Of course. I'll be ready in about twenty minutes."

"Very good, sir; and that appointment with Mr. Marston of Reinach's."

"Yes."

"The telephone operator spoke to me about it and I've been on to Reinach's myself."

"Well?"

"There's no such person as Mr. Marston connected with Reinach's, sir."

EPILOGUE

HOTEL GOLDENER LÖWE,
FRANKFORT-AM-MAIN,
DEUTSCHLAND.

My dear Fleming,

Our last guess was right. Root was in the Frankfort syndicate. Harden had begun to negotiate with Von Strukerks of Amsterdam, not Reinach's at all. Root invented the Reinach's affair (and, of course, Marston was Von Winckel) in order to head Harden off from the Dutchmen.

I imagine that Kauskas recognized Root as an exploiter of Baltania, and that Root and Von Winckel killed him and chucked him into the Thames. Root got away, as we know, next day, leaving Von Winckel to carry out his contract. Root wrote the note to Harden, and told Winckel about the well. (Root knew Westbrook as a boy, too.) I fancy the idea of the well was to let people think Harden had gone off on some characteristically erratic adventure, so that Winckel could get away safely before the hullabaloo set in.

My guess—and it's going to be my last—is

that Marston stabbed Harden, and was going to cart him down to the well, but was surprised by Lavender Arlington's appearance. He dived down the back stairs, and waited for the alarm to be given. It wasn't given, so he crept up the front stairs *en route* for his bedroom. He trod in the pool of blood at the top of the stairs because, of course, he didn't expect the body would be there. He had left it at the far end of the corridor. He went out and chucked the boots into the lorry and came back to face the racket. He's a cool card.

I've got the little man who pretended to be the Baltanian reporter. He's a private detective from Danzig and, I think, was hired by the Strukerks to keep an eye on Harden.

I think that's all.

Will you pass the enclosed cheque on to Mr. and Mrs. Brookes as a wedding present.

Yours ever,

WALTHER VON HOFFMANN.

P.S.—I had a pretty hot 74 round Wannsee on Saturday in the Monthly Medal. Putting beautifully and hitting the ball out of sight.

THE END

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